

# Colonial Mexican painting and the Pinacoteca Virreinal Museum

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**T**he Pinacoteca Virreinal<sup>1</sup> is a beautiful and unique museum, located in the downtown Mexico City district known as the “Historic Center.” Its beauty derives both from the works on exhibition and the building in which they are exhibited, whose main hall used to be the Church of San Diego, featuring a nobly proportioned baroque nave and architecture dating from the 18th century.

It is unique for the harmony between its contents and the building which contains them; for the spaciousness of its interior, which we sense as soon as we enter the museum; and for the artistic importance and great scale of its almost 300 paintings, which were created during the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and the first decades of the nineteenth century.

While the pictures we encounter in the museum may strike us as distinctly European—as indeed they are, from an aesthetic viewpoint—these works are testimony to the encounter between master painters of the Old and New Worlds, as well as to

<sup>1</sup> *Pinacoteca Virreinal* means “art gallery of the viceregal period,” i.e., the period in which Mexico was a colony governed by a viceroy appointed by the Spanish crown.

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Luis Juárez, *The Archangel Michael* (oil on masonite, 1.72 X 1.53 m).

the evolution of the fine arts that occurred in Mexico during the century following the Spanish conquest.

In the 16th century, the collaboration of artists from the New World with those from the Old gave



José de Ibarra, Guatemala's Virgin of Carmen (oil on canvas, 1.39 X 1.04 m).

rise to a number of noteworthy aesthetic phenomena. The high artistic level that painting had reached in Mesoamerica (i.e., Mexico and adjacent regions) by the time the Europeans arrived can be seen in pre-Columbian codices and murals. The technique consisted of tracing flat figures, frequently outlined in black, and filling the figures in with the colors indigenous artists knew how to produce and apply.

While pre-Columbian artists were unfamiliar with the use of oil for dissolving colors, they used the juice of the maguey cactus (which when fermented produces the popular alcoholic beverage *pulque*) for the same purpose. They used sticky cactus sap to make the paint adhere to walls. In order to prepare wall surfaces for painting, they applied a type of stone called *quimaltizatl*, which when ground and kneaded produced a

smooth, glossy stucco. As "canvases" for smaller-format paintings, artists used animal skins, maguey cactus papyrus, paper made from the *amate* (Mexican fig tree), and cotton textiles.

More than 250 Mesoamerican codices have been preserved, although only sixteen of them are pre-Hispanic and of those sixteen only two are presently in Mexico. Nevertheless, reproductions are available, allowing us to judge these works artistically: we find in them an abstraction that reaches the essential line of form, denoting a high degree of artistic power, and overwhelmingly joyful color. They are, moreover, of undeniable anthropological interest.

The painters who came from Europe in the 16th century were masters who, through years of study, had assimilated the technique and art of preparing materials, as well as drawing, composition, perspective and color. They had a great aesthetic sense testifying to the particular artistic period Spain was passing through at that time, influenced by Italian Renaissance paintings, German



Anonymous, The lord of great power (oil on canvas, 1.73 X 1.09 m).



*Sebastián López de Arteaga, Madonna and child (oil on canvas, 0.93 X 0.98 m).*

engravings, and the panel works created in Flanders—akin to illuminated manuscripts in their perfection and detail, with brilliant colors and varnishes resembling enamel work.

The mutual recognition of artistic quality between Old and New World painters began as soon as the Spaniards set foot on Mesoamerican soil, as Bernal Díaz del Castillo, participant in and chronicler of the Spanish conquest, noted: "... many Indians from the surrounding towns came on a pilgrimage to the island of Cozumel... and Cortés called for a large amount of lime, which was abundant in that town, and for Indian masons; and a very clean altar was built, upon which we placed the image of Our Lady...." A few days later they returned to the same location to repair their ship: "... we returned to the port from which we had left and we unloaded the cassava

cakes, and we found the image of Our Lady and the Cross very clean... and this made us glad."

This narrative shows the artistic sense of the Indians, who had safeguarded the painting as a precious object. How did they see this image, so different in its aesthetic and meaning from the drawings in their codices?

Some days later the Spaniards reached Cempoala, where they found Moctezuma's tax collector, whose name was Tendile. Díaz del Castillo observed: "... he brought with him great painters, and there are such in Mexico, and he ordered them to paint naturally the face and visage and body and features of Cortés, and of all the captains and soldiers, and ships and sails, and horses and Doña Marina and Aguilar, and even two greyhounds, and gunshot and balls, and all of the army we had brought, and he took this to his lord."



*Miguel Cabrera, Virgin of the Apocalypse (oil on canvas, 3.38 X 3.53 m).*

Three Franciscan friars from the Convent of Ghent arrived in 1523. When the “twelve” arrived one year later, together they began construction of the Convent of San Francisco in Mexico City, with a school attached named “San José de los Naturales” (Saint Joseph of the Natives), in which instruction was given in doctrine, grammar,

“counting,” and all trades and arts, in accordance with the students’ aptitudes.

The class in painting was given by a friar named Diego Valadés, born in the Mexican city of Tlaxcala, who published a book entitled *Rethorica Cristiana*, which he illustrated himself with beautiful Renaissance-style engravings.

Regarding the Indians who learned to paint in this school, Bernal Díaz commented: “... many Indians native to these lands have learned all the trades that there are in Castile, and very well.... Such a renowned painter as the very ancient Apelles and those of our times who were called Berruguete and Michelangelo... would not, with their delicate paintbrushes, produce the works... that are made by three Indians, Mexicans, who are masters of this trade, who call themselves Aquinas and John of the Cross and ‘Ringlet’.”

Thus it was that painting, which in the beginning served as a substitute for language as a means of communication between men of such different cultures, evolved through intermingling, by means of collaboration among Spanish and Indian painters, all of them responsive to the call of art.

Pre-Hispanic masters made their mark on this collaboration through their knowledge of coloring agents and other materials. In the beginning, the oil of the chia plant substituted for olive oil in the fabrication of oil-based paints; panel paintings were carried out on wood from the *tampincerán* or *ayacahuite* trees; the cochineal plant was found to be the best source for all shades of crimson, and the reverse sides of panel paintings were reinforced with stripped-down maguay leaves. These leaves were applied with a glue extracted from the bulb of a tropical orchid, and arranged so as to go against the grain of the wood.

For their part, the Spaniards contributed through teaching the artistic advances they had made in drawing, composition and color. They also taught the secrets of foreshortening and other perspective effects giving the impression of volume. One of their most important contributions was to pass on the



Cristóbal de Villalpando, Nuptials (oil on canvas).

traditional iconography of the Catholic religion for the representation of the mysteries of faith as well as Biblical scenes and personages.

Iconography had taken shape and developed over the centuries. But iconography spread with the discovery of metal engraving, making it possible to reproduce images which were brought to the Americas in the form of the illustrations in the breviaries that monks brought with them as their only baggage.

The manuscript division of Washington's Library of Congress holds a document entitled *Codex of Huejotzingo* and dated 1531. It contains an image of Indian imprint and European iconography. The explanatory note states: "One of the first representations of 'Madonna and Child' made in the Americas." In this picture we note foreshortening in the drawing of the human figure, which proves that the *tlacuilo*, or wise man who painted the codex, had already assimilated the advances made by European drawing technique.

In New Spain, as Mexico was known during the Colonial period, painting was usually done in family workshops installed in the master painter's home. The painter and his family would live on the upper floors, while the ground floor was given over to the workshop.

In accordance with custom, the painters' guild had a religious confraternity for its members, with a patron image as titular head of the guild. The patron image was the Virgin of Socorro who was worshipped in the Church of San José de Gracia. A century after the Conquest it was moved to the church of the Convent of Santa Inés, where tablets can still be found indicating that the remains of Juan Rodríguez Juárez, Miguel Cabrera and other famous painters are resting there.

The paintings' style varied over time, in line with historical events,



Manuel Talavera, Saint Rosalie (oil on canvas, 1.49 X 1.11 m).

changes in the predominant conception of the world, and the progression of great artistic figures, who, as was to be expected, were widely copied. In Mexico, during the 300-year period covered by the museum, works were produced which reflected the influence of the

Renaissance and particularly of the Italian masters, Leonardo Da Vinci, Michelangelo and Raphael.

This was followed by the style conventionally called Mannerism, denoting the modification of the classical canons. This style served as a transition between Renaissance and



Nicolás Correa, *Mystic nuptials of Saint Rose of Lima* (oil on canvas, 1.64 X 1.44 m).

Baroque, under the continued influence of the Italian masters.

In the Pinacoteca Virreinal Museum's permanent exhibition, this style is represented by Andrés de Concha, who arrived in Mexico in 1568; Baltasar de Echave Orio, known through his works beginning in 1580; Luis Juárez, a Mexican-born disciple of Echave Orio and officer of his workshop; Alonso López de Herrera, born in Valladolid, Spain, in 1579 (the date and place of this painter's birth have been the subject of some confusion, but the research of Carlota Creel has enabled us to state them with certainty); and Baltasar de Echave Ibia, son of Baltasar de Echave Orio—as well as four paintings whose authorship remains unknown.

Next in the list of styles is the Chiaroscuro Baroque, originated by Michelangelo Merisi, known as "Caravaggio" after the Italian town where he was born. In the second third of the seventeenth century, this style, with its rather dramatic representations, was perfectly adapted to the Counter-Reformation and the dissemination of religious sentiment. The outstanding master of this school in Mexico was Sebastián López de Arteaga, who arrived in 1648, dying seven years later. Pedro Ramírez and Baltasar de Echave Rioja (grandson of Baltasar de Echave Orio) were continuators of this artistic trend.

The artist rightly considered the best painter of the Colonial epoch is José Juárez, son of the Mannerist painter Luis Juárez. His work, while adhering to the European Baroque school, displays a highly personal and original style. Juárez was undoubtedly familiar with, and inspired by, the work of Zurbarán. Yet the originality of his composition and the artistic quality of his work demand that his paintings, seven of which are in the Pinacoteca Virreinal Museum's collection, be judged on their own merits.

Another phase of the Baroque style which produced notable works of art was that adopted by Antonio Rodríguez, a disciple of José Juárez. Rodríguez married Juárez's daughter; their sons Nicolás and Juan Rodríguez Juárez became famous masters in their own right. This artistic phase comes to an end with Hipólito de Rioja, whose work, while belonging to the purest Non-Chiaroscuro Baroque school, is full of joy and movement; and Juan Tinoco, a painter of unknown origin who worked in the city of Puebla. Tinoco's *Biblical Battle* is so remarkable that it deserves to be



Andrés de Concha, *Saint Cecilia* (oil on wood, 2.90 X 1.92 m).



Miguel Cabrera, *Virgin of the Apocalypse* (detail, oil on canvas, 3.38 X 3.53 m).

displayed in the Escorial Palace's hall of battles.

The next Baroque group, which manifests specific national characteristics, is made up of entire families of painters. The Rodríguez Juárez brothers belong to this group, as do Juan and Nicolás Correa and the exceptional artist Cristóbal de Villalpando. These painters worked during the final quarter of the 17th century and the first quarter of the 18th.

During that period, New Spain was passing through a distinct and crucial phase of its history. While Zurbarán and Murillo sent some of their works here to be sold by agents, there were no longer any European painters in the colony. Moreover, the painters of New Spain were becoming increasingly aware of how different they were from Spaniards newly arrived in the colony.

The mathematician, cosmographer, poet and master painter Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora was the first to put this into words: "As I am neither Spaniard nor Indian, what then am I?" His answer, which accepted that being Mexican meant belonging to a distinct entity with its own anthropological roots, gave voice to a new-found national pride.

Around the time that Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz<sup>2</sup> was writing her

<sup>2</sup> Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (1651-1695) was a Carmelite nun who became one of the most famous and beloved writers in the history of Mexico.

sonnets in the Náhuatl language, Cristóbal de Villalpando painted his great picture representing the Plaza of Mexico City (ca. 1698); Nicolás Rodríguez Juárez painted the first series of depictions of the “castes” or racial mixtures existing in Mexico; Diego Correa made a great map of the city; Juan Rodríguez Juárez devoted himself to painting the common people, among them Indians and “castes”; and the illustrious painter Juan Correa, a mulatto, painted himself into his religious pictures as the figure closest to the each painting’s main personage, proudly depicting the dark skin color of his “caste.”

By coincidence, the thirty-second Viceroy of New Spain, appointed to govern the colony in 1697, was the Count of Moctezuma. His title powerfully evoked the pre-Hispanic past, to which he lent prestige through the pictorial representations he often sponsored.

One of the works in the Pinacoteca Museum’s holdings which symbolizes this moment in Mexico’s history is the medium-format oil on canvas painted by the master Juan



Luis Juárez, *The Annunciation* (oil on wood, 1.24 X 0.85 m).



Baltasar de Echave Ibia, *St. John the Evangelist* (oil on canvas, 2.05 X 1.24 m).

Correa around 1700 and entitled *The angelic musicians*. The artist was clearly inspired by a work of Bartolomé Esteban Murillo. But there is an essential difference: Correa painted one of the angels—precisely the one closest to the baby Jesus—as a mulatto, and another, who is seen playing drums, as a *mestizo* (person of mixed Indian and European parentage).

In this work, the master sought to present “a celebration of Mexico’s racial diversity,” as the art historian Markus Burke aptly notes when referring to paintings of the “castes.”

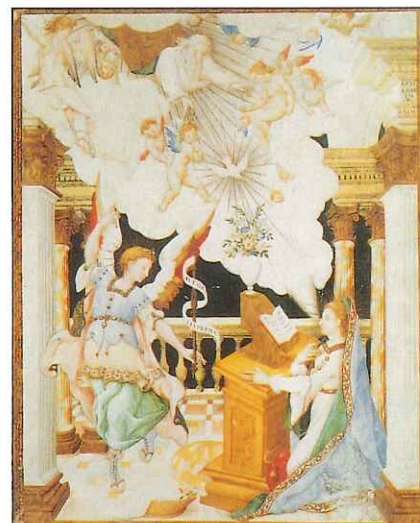
A young man born in Guadalajara came to the city to learn the painter’s art. His name was José de Ibarra. According to one of his writings he was a student of Juan Correa, but I have found a document proving that he was also a craftsman in the workshop of the Rodríguez Juárez brothers. Ibarra had a long life, enabling him to serve as the link between the group we have been discussing, which we will call the Nationalist Baroque school, and the

group that followed it, headed by Miguel Cabrera and other distinguished masters, during the middle of the 18th century.

As an aid to composition and iconographic correctness, this group often based itself on engravings brought over from Europe and preserved to this day; some of these engravings, in the Rococo style, were made by the brothers Klauber. Nevertheless, these artists’ works differ significantly from these engravings.

This group carried out two important projects. The first was to give their individual professional opinions on the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe. These judgments were compiled by Miguel Cabrera in a volume entitled *Maravilla americana y conjunto de raras maravillas* (Marvel of the Americas and ensemble of rare marvels). This group of master painters is known by the name “marvel of the Americas.”

The other project was founding a Painters’ Academy, which represented a new means of apprenticeship in Mexico. While such academies had been established in some parts of Europe during the preceding century, the Mexican academy was founded only one year after the Academy of



Luis Lagarto, *The Annunciation* (watercolor on vellum, 0.25 X 0.21 m).



Luis Lagarto, Virgin of the Rosary with two saints, St. Catherine of Alexandria and St. Catherine of Siena (watercolor on vellum, 0.30 X 0.25 m).

San Fernando in Madrid, and simultaneously with the Academy of San Carlos in Valencia, Spain. Although the Mexican academy was short-lived—closing after three years due to a lack of funding—it was a laudable and fruitful enterprise.

Both the volume on the Virgin of Guadalupe and the document establishing the Painters' Academy record the names of the master painters involved in these projects. The most notable of these painters, with works conserved and exhibited in the Pinacoteca Virreinal Museum, are José de Ibarra, Miguel Cabrera, Juan Patricio Morlete Ruíz, Francisco Antonio Vallejo, Nicolás Enríquez, and José de Alcívar.

The foundation of the Academy of San Carlos in Mexico was preceded by the arrival from Spain of Don Jerónimo Antonio Gil, a distinguished engraver born in 1732 in the city of Zamora and trained in the Academy of San Carlos in Valencia, Spain. After

winning an engraving contest, he was appointed Engraver of the Mint in Mexico. He was accompanied by his two sons as well as two disciples.

Gil had also been commissioned by the Spanish Crown to establish an Academy of Engraving. This academy was established on the premises of the Mint, and met with such success that Gil—in view of the noisy surroundings and the high number of students attending classes—requested royal sponsorship for the foundation of a new academy which would teach not only engraving but painting, sculpture, gold- and silver-work.

He spoke with Don José Fernando Mangino, superintendent of the Mint in Mexico City, and won his approval for the project. Together they presented the request to the king, and after receiving part of the necessary funds, the academy was founded; classes began in 1785. For various reasons, the original teachers left the academy, but they were soon replaced by Don Rafael Ximeno y Planes as director of painting classes, Manuel Tolsá for sculpture, and Joaquín Fabregat for engraving.

The style disseminated by the newly arrived masters was Neo-Classicism, which had originated with the discovery of the ruins of the Roman cities of Pompeii and Herculano, buried by the lava of Mount Vesuvius in the fourth century A.D. The discovery of these cities was sponsored by Carlos III when he was viceroy of Naples and his half brother Ferdinand VI was king of Spain. It was natural that the monarch who had discovered these vestiges of Classic art, so harmonious, delicate and refined, would adopt their aesthetic and spread it to Spain's dominions overseas.

Liberalism and the French Revolution, which led to a break from the style associated with monarchy and the Catholic Church, spurred the development of Neo-Classicism. This trend was soon copied throughout the world. In Mexico this shift in styles

went hand in hand with a shift in political conceptions, since the idea of independence began to grow after the Spanish monarchy fell under the blows of Napoleon Bonaparte.

Rafael Ximeno painted portraits of his associates Tolsá and Gil, which the Pinacoteca Virreinal Museum conserves and exhibits with pride. The museum also exhibits five of this master's small-format oils on canvas as well as a number of paintings by his Mexican disciples and contemporaries: a plan by Tolsá for the construction of a Neo-Classical altar in the Church of Santa Teresa la Nueva; the famous *Portrait of Doña María Luisa Gonzaga Foncerrada y Lavarrieta*, by José María Vázquez; *Don Manuel Justo Bolea* and *The blessing of the table*, oils on canvas by José de Alcívar; *Saint Ann and the Virgin as a child*, oil on canvas, and *The prophet Elijah in the desert*, watercolor on paper, by Don Francisco Eduardo Tresguerras.

In addition to the undoubted aesthetic pleasure provided by the beauty of the works on exhibition, a visit to the Pinacoteca Virreinal Museum is an encounter with the history of Mexico, as seen through the eyes and reflected in the works of her best artists.

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