

THE ART OF THE NEW WORLD AFTER THE SPANISH CONQUEST

I purpose to deal with the subject literally: to what extent is Spanish-American art an adaptation and to what extent is it spontaneous?

If one considers the immediate reaction of the artist faced with the complex reality that surrounds him, our question is addressed on the one hand to the Spanish artist who found himself facing the new American reality and, on the other hand, to the Indian artist who had to find his mode of expression within this new reality, created by the Spanish conquest.

I

Under the Spanish domination painting was not the art that contributed most to the enrichment of the American artistic patrimony. Yet no art better than painting can instruct us as to the limits within which the colonial regime allowed artistic expression to develop.

Translated by Victor A. Velen.

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In the Spanish provinces of America painting was limited specifically to religious art and, within the framework of this art, it was content in general to illustrate scenes from the New Testament and the lives of the saints. Other subjects—landscapes, *genre* scenes, mythology, nudes—were governed by an interdict, explicit or implied, which was eased only for portraits (of nobles or the clergy), a genus which began to flourish from the second half of the seventeenth century onwards. In short, painting was entirely subservient to the reproduction of devout subjects. The colonial power, in imposing restrictions of this type, hoped to safeguard the faith of the Indians (and incidentally also that of the Creoles and resident Spaniards)

From its origin colonial art was surrounded by prohibitions. Realistic perception as well as flights of fancy were forbidden, that is, the role itself of art, which is to create an aesthetic verisimilitude that transcends reality, was replaced by the obligation to represent a truth held to be absolute. Hence the role of art was reduced to copying or at best to finding variants for obligatory representations. There was for this reason no increase in the artistic energies that in turn generate art; such an increase moreover can only spring from a clash with transmitted forms. By always repeating the same subjects, colonial painting gave up exploring the reality of the transmitted images. It was used, but it had no finality in itself. It was used in order to increase religious fervor. Painting thus abandoned its analytical function to become transformed—consciously and unconsciously—into an instrument of repression.

Research made in recent years has led gradually to the identification of the strata of metropolitan art which provided the models for colonial painting: namely the engravings by Flemish and Italian mannerists, following the initial predominance of late medieval woodcuts and engravings from northern Europe. As has been shown by the late Martin Soria, this printed material was either copied or incorporated from the last quarter of the sixteenth century onwards up to the middle of the eighteenth century. To religious prints we should add reproductions of mannerist painting on copper plates, imported from Antwerp, as well as paintings by Italo-Cretan *madonneri* of Venetian origin. Finally from the last quarter of the sixteenth century the artistic

trend in America was to be determined by a certain number of lesser resident Flemish and Italian masters and, in the course of the seventeenth century, by the influence of the work of Rubens, Ribera and Zurbaran.

Quite logically, in the main current of colonial painting a Spanish experience, such as that of Velazquez, was lacking, since he was not a religious painter. The aesthetic objectivity of Velazquez, his observant eye, was not adaptable to the colonies. Moreover, with the exception of the royal family and the houses of a few Spanish grandees, Velazquez is also absent from the Spain of his epoch. The sensibility of the Spanish world, conditioned on the one hand by moral and religious censorship, was subject on the other to a hierarchic order which conceded the court sights that were forbidden to others.

In America the colonial power used painting to organize the perception of the exterior world. With every means at its disposal it succeeded in diverting attention from reality. Not only were subjects of humanistic interest, such as mythology and mythological nudes, excluded for pedagogic reasons, but banned as well was the representation of immediate reality, that is, landscape and the natives. An official taboo was brought to bear on these subjects, and what is worse, a non-official taboo as well. (It is not by chance that the literature of the young republics of the nineteenth century clamored so much for the incorporation of American reality.) All critical observation, all realistic discussion, all research penetrating the surface was suspect (the reason why, e. g. the colonial portraits are superficial and purely representative). For the civil or ecclesiastic authorities, American reality was suspicious, since it was potentially pagan. It was hence an enemy, much as was nature in the course of the Middle Ages in Europe. It is true that even in the metropolis important landscape painters were not numerous. Taste for landscapes requires a secularization of feeling, which did not materialize in Spain, at least up to the period of Enlightenment. Besides the Court and nobility had at their disposal the whole of foreign production, which was however never much in demand.

But if in America the natural stimulants of the milieu did not work, it was not solely a consequence of the coercive measures of the administration. A visual tradition was also lacking which

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would have led to the perception of this new reality, to which literature responded by using its entire arsenal of *topoi* about the distant and ideal land. A vision nourished by messianic and mythical hopes was projected on America, which gave way to a faint consciousness of American individuality only at the end of the century. But while literary prefigurations slowly began to break down, painting succeeded in establishing a visual tradition only towards the turn of the eighteenth century.

In spite of the recent and well documented contributions on the subject by Robertson in *Mexican Manuscript Painting of the Early Colonial Period*, we know very little about the transformation of the Indian into a European painter. It is easy however to reconstruct his technical apprenticeship, as well as the exterior process of artistic acculturation. The Indian assimilated European techniques very rapidly and became a skilled artisan at the service of the religious orders. He was completely won over to the reproduction of European subjects, exactly as his Creole or Spanish colleagues. But, although his artistic tendency was entirely European, his social position continually isolated him, even in the exercise of his craft. The guilds did not admit him; hence he worked by preference for a religious order and under discriminating economic conditions. Political events have demonstrated his identification with the church, although he remained a stranger to the secular power. For the rest we lack the facts, since his way of seeing, fixed by the Spanish influence, possessed him to such an extent that frequently only the name of the painter indicates that the work was created by an Indian.

Up until now I have spoken only of painting and not of painters. Each school of colonial painting—Mexico, Bogotá, Cuzco, Quito, Potosí—produced estimable works. Yet none of them surpasses in quality the work of an European atelier. However at this level the works hardly differ from European production, for Spain transmitted everything that materially furthers artisanship, including academism.

II

Let us pass on to architecture.

The discussion on spontaneity and adaptation began in America almost with the conquest, that is, before the end of the first quarter of the sixteenth century. The chronicler Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo, referring to the plans of the new towns, claimed that "they are of our times," and hence spontaneous. In opposition to this, the Italian humanist Alessandro Geraldini, bishop of Santo Domingo, considered them a projection of classical antiquity. Today, this latter opinion has been making some headway. For the plans indeed transmit a type of medieval foundation inspired by treatises on military art, such as that by Vegetius.

Colonial architecture too was essentially a derivative art. The cathedral, the parochial church, the hospital, the town hall, the main square, the plan of the town, were copied on metropolitan patterns. In the overseas territories only the proportions were changed, but the architectural types remained the same. This architecture was laden with collective memories as well as religious and civil significance. It represented a totality of values, but it created none of its own. The very act of recognizing and identifying the familiar pattern increases the sensation of security experienced by people overseas, and thus structures the collective integration. Such an aim is from the start obviously in contradiction with any aesthetic experiment.

Colonial art rarely tries new formulas. Experiments of the type of the unfinished cathedral of Pátzcuaro are not very numerous.

At the beginning of the colonization, alongside of metropolitan architectural types of the period, it is possible to identify some throwbacks to even earlier formulas, as, for instance, fortified churches or the various forerunners of the "open chapels" for the Indians. In fact, Spanish or European models from the Middle Ages, which had become obsolete, relegated to peripheral areas or else reserved for special occasions, are naively taken up again.

Nevertheless, in what way was the architecture of the overseas territories distinguished from that of metropolitan archi-

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ecture? In other words, how can the regional differences, which are after all considerable, be explained? After two generations of research the old and commodious hypothesis that there was an Indianization of Spanish art has become less acceptable and other explanations are called for.

In my view three factors determine the familiar but at the same time strange aspect of colonial art. They are: variations of a typical character resulting from the mixture of traditional forms; provincialization; and finally the development of certain secondary elements and tendencies of the metropolitan art.

Let us proceed in order. The new towns were populated by Spaniards who did not all necessarily come from the same region; hence they were to reflect somehow the native region of each group of settlers. This phenomenon may be noted in official architecture, that is, in the civil and religious monuments of a certain importance, as well as in popular architecture—and this is a significant fact. Contrary to Spain, where in this period a supra-regional official style was being developed, the fusion here operated not only at the level of an art that was conscious of its methods, but also at a lower stratum, protected by ancestral habits and always refractory to innovations. The process of integration did not start at an artistic level, but on an artisanal one. It was moreover less a fusion than a juxtaposition of elements within the unifying framework constituted by a town or a province. In the colonial evolution, after this first founding phase, which is characterized by juxtaposition, stratifications are found that permit us to identify the successive waves of new immigrants. I am speaking mainly of regions on the periphery of the Spanish Empire, such as, the islands and coasts of the Caribbean, the whole of the Rio de la Plata area, whose unfavorable economic situation necessitated periodic repopulating. In the course of the second half of the seventeenth century, the contribution of elements originating in the Canary Islands to popular architecture of the Caribbean zone is an example of this stratification. In the colonies then one finds again the very process of consolidation which in the homeland, with the exception of the Kingdom of Granada, ends with the reconquests of the thirteenth century, when in the territories,

subjugated and repopulated by Christians, groups and individuals of different origins were established.

To the *mélange* of Spanish regional elements, which we have just mentioned, foreign contributions are to be added, as much in popular as in official architecture, in marginal areas as well as in important centers. In principle, they are the same influences that were felt in the metropolis, but their conjunction and their specific intensity was entirely different in the overseas provinces. I refer to the Italians, Flemish, Portuguese, as well as to the numerous architects and artisans of the Jesuits (the latter often coming from the Catholic provinces—southern or south-eastern—of the old German Empire: Austria, Hungary, Bohemia and Bavaria).

To complete the picture, a slight but effective contraband in art was engaged in at the American frontiers, despite official obstacles. It brought Mexican influences to Havana, Portuguese influences from Brazil to the area of the Rio de la Plata and Dutch influences to Venezuela via Curaçao.

In order to identify the factors that contributed to making the American architectural lexicon so varied, we would have to distinguish between European elements, first-, second- and third-hand. But unfortunately, our tools are weaker than our appetites.

I will not dwell here on the phenomena of provincialization, since they are always identical. Nowhere in the Spanish Empire has the European architectural vocabulary been truly uprooted; this is the essential fact. The radical but productive regression that Roman art underwent at the hands of the invading hordes or the inhabitants of provinces contiguous to the Roman Empire did not take place in America. Nevertheless, we should mention the progressive deformation of architectural ornamentation, which in the Indian *binterland* developed during the eighteenth century. Ornamentation, being the exterior shell and hence the most vulnerable part of architecture, is the first to show the effects of a new visual approach which is incapable of bringing forms into agreement with their true meaning. Kubler was right when he declared that the aspect of architectural decoration of the eighteenth century in Guatemala and in southern Peru is not specifically Indian. The inversion of the relations between the design and the background, between light and shadow, as well

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as the growing profusion of ornament, are in effect but typical symptoms of provincialization. This is the very set of phenomena studied, at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, by the Viennese Wickhoff and Riegl, whose work still constitutes a considerable contribution to the understanding of the problems of artistic acculturation.

But why do these phenomena appear only towards the end or towards the beginning of the colonial period and in regions inhabited predominantly by Indians? In fact, although I admit that this phenomenon is not typically Indian, in America it is nonetheless the Indian *hinterland* that produces this type of architectural decoration.

Here is a sector of colonial art in which, despite the excellent research carried out by Neumayer in 1948, much remains to be done.

I return to the problem of provincialization. Its importance can be judged only *a posteriori*, once the regression has reached its culminating point. From there on the disintegrating currents prepare the terrain for a new artistic will. Spanish art, even in the cases we have just described, does not reach this stage for a simple reason: when the Spanish Empire broke up, it was not the Indians who took power but the Creoles. Relations between the young American republics and Spain were interrupted, but they continued with the rest of Europe and, moreover, they were resumed even with Spain fairly rapidly. The European capitals then provided the architectural model up to World War I. Only modern architecture departs from Spanish tradition, relegating its subsequent development to the rank of folklore and artificial evocation.

Until now we have dealt with peripheral American regions. Kubler demonstrated very well that distinct inspirations created the differences that were manifest, from the beginning of the colonization, between the two great regions governed by the viceroys, that is, Mexico and Peru. The North chose metropolitan models; the South, Flemish models against a general Spanish background. Although this difference may be due largely to some Flemings who stayed in South America, the process of polarization in the colonies indicates a disintegration of the forces reunited in the art of the metropolis. It is then only the degree

of intensity which in principle distinguishes this situation from that which we have been able to observe earlier in the peripheral regions, insofar as the constructions of the Jesuits are concerned.

However, in examining more closely the Flemish touch in Peru, and more particularly in El Cuzco, it will be noted that an architecture that could have served as its model exists nowhere in Flanders. In order to explain the façade of St. Francis at Quito, it is enough to imagine a Flemish artist, an admirer of Serlio, who would have been inspired by Italian mannerism. On the other hand, despite its monumental aspect, the façade of the church of the Jesuits at El Cuzco has a different origin. It must have been inspired by a treatise on joinery, or even a drawing for an altar or a tabernacle. The type of Spanish retable-façade supplies a framework in which Spanish tradition and a Flemish artisan's interpretation of mannerist models are blended. Moreover, in Europe, especially in the trans-Alpine regions, Flanders, Germany and France, treatises on joinery, following in the wake of the learned speculations of the mannerists, enjoyed an extraordinarily wide circulation. The preponderant role played by artisan work explains the popularity of the retable-façades in America, starting with the second half of the seventeenth century, a period in which this *genre* of architecture had already disappeared from the metropolitan lexicon.

A century later, in Mexico, another element of woodcarving was raised to the status of monumental architecture: the *estipite*. The integration of this element into the language of Spanish architecture can be followed step by step: from the treatise to the retable and hence to the church façade. The metropolis, which besides official baroque architecture, indulged in an architecture of popular origin, to a certain degree took part in this last evolution, but in Spain the *estipite*, which was used in the decoration of façades, never reached the same importance as in the colonies.

The development of secondary elements created in America an architecture of European origin, but one which could not be found as such in Europe. Thus, an unknown Flanders rose in Peru, and a non-existent Granada sprang up in Mexico. Certain aspects of Latin America remind us of Spain, but in fact neither the architecture of the peripheral areas, still less that

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of the great capitals, could be integrated into any specific province of the homeland.

Only since a few years ago have art historians appreciated the capital role played by mannerism in Spanish art. In the last analysis, much of the so-called Spanish baroque, which seemed to be a sort of escapade within the trends of European architecture, turns out to be either a survival or a new interpretation of mannerist forms. No wonder that art overseas should reflect this preference.

The label of the style moreover has little importance. It is the human attitude which counts, an attitude which set the style of Spanish art until the middle of the eighteenth century. Being ostentatious and pretentious, mannerism is the European style of insecurity. It was a language spoken out of a lack of freedom, which chose to express itself through allusion and abstraction.

This choice was not, as was believed, imposed exclusively by the artistic dictatorship of metropolitan bureaucracy. The artists and artisans of Spanish America themselves, Spaniards, Creoles or even Indians, copied and developed metropolitan forms, because they corresponded intimately to their idea of life. The result is an obvious circle in which repetition conditions the sensibility and sensibility thus conditioned calls for repetition. Indeed colonial art found no way out, and for this reason the retarding and repressive action of the formulas became intensified.

Perhaps we should stress that with the exception of the *estipite*, that is, a more or less fantastic abstraction, it was not the fantastic and deforming tendencies of mannerism that emigrated to the New World, but rather the academic and standardizing ones.

III

Let us return to the retable-façades, which are so characteristic of Spanish-American art.

All architecture is at the same time function and aesthetic spectacle. This heterogeneous aspect of architecture is a source of embarrassment for those who endeavour to construct idealistic or romantic aesthetic systems. Architecture, in its function, is a tactile rather than a visual experience. Its aesthetic quality and its

visual effect are secondary; they are noticed only in passing. The faithful going to mass are only incidentally concerned with the aesthetic character of the church.

All public architecture has one of these two functions: it is either commemorative (a monument) or it symbolises a way. Christian religious architecture encompasses both motives: the apse of the church is a monument which towers above the relics of the titular saint; the nave is a way. But let us get to the essential point.

I have spoken of the unchanging character of Spanish architecture insofar as the reproduction of forms that are charged with collective memories is concerned. This hardly prevents the introduction of visual variations, quite the contrary. But can these visual variations affect the tactile experience?

We have learned that the retable-façade, rejected by Spain by the middle of the seventeenth century, was adopted by America where it developed more fully. Does the fact that secondary elements were advanced to the first rank and that certain formulas coined by the artisan assumed a monumental status suffice to explain the entire phenomenon?

Already at the end of the seventeenth century the concept of the retable-façade is to be found in American texts, or at any rate we learn about portals in the form of a retable. The expression evidently means that the façade is decorated in such a way as to resemble a retable. Now, as an art historian I would like to advance one more step: the elements we have to deal with are not just elements borrowed from retables and then applied to the decoration of façades. But be it a conscious or unconscious intention of the architect: the façade is made transparent in order that the altar may be seen from a distance.

This sensation of the transparency of a wall is not a modern speculation; it is an idea of fairly ancient origin. In the course of the history of Christian religious architecture the role played by the wall has been questioned periodically. The transparency of the wall (though not of the façade) is a main theme of gothic art. The idea of an enclosed space, penetrated solely by the transcendence, as well as the metaphysical speculations on the nature of light, contributed considerably to the transformation of the aspect of churches in the course of the high Middle Ages.

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The Italian baroque succeeded in secularizing this interpenetration of space, and the resulting façades bear witness to the shock between the exterior and the interior space. The Spanish world did not accept this *genre* of baroque aesthetics, since the *élan vital* of Spain was still entirely conditioned by religious experience. The retablo-façade, which, beginning with the sixteenth century, replaces in certain Spanish churches the façades in Italian style (triumphal arch, nymphaeum), was then utilized overseas to express a quest of profoundly baroque origin.

The subsequent and decisive development of this theme belonged henceforth to colonial art, and not by chance. Let us continue our analysis. The sensation of the transparency of the wall is transmitted through the eye. But in this case the visual effect does not play a secondary role. The eye precedes the body in penetrating into the church. The desire to reach the end of the mystical way in order to achieve salvation anticipates the view of the altar. Architecture transforms this visual anticipation into solid reality. On the other hand, by projecting the interior of the church outside of it, the road that leads to it and the space that surrounds it become in turn an ideal nave, thus greatly increasing the radiation of the architectural body. Visual experience is transformed into tactile experience. This dialectical process, which deprives the fantasy of any personal initiative, explains very clearly what I understand by the repressive character of colonial art.

One last observation. On the subject of the road to be taken, I wonder how one should interpret the change of proportion of the naves in Mexican churches of the sixteenth century as compared with Spanish models.

Is the excessive length of the narrow nave of these convent churches due exclusively to a question of space or was there the intention to identify the way leading to salvation with the sacred path of the American pyramids? Let us remember that already the Augustinians had enriched the façades of their churches in order to compete with the pomp of Aztec rites. But, in fact, only the discovery of new documents would permit us to answer this question.