
Historiography and Museography in the Colonial Museum of Bogotá (1999-2012)*

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ABSTRACT

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The Colonial Museum of Bogotá was recently closed due to a series of works of restoration in the building and a complete renewal of its curatorship. This fact invites us to look over the work that has been done before, particularly because during the last decade this institution became a research center where historians, conservators, and artists worked together. When one went through each of the exhibition rooms that were opened to the public between 2005 and 2012, it was evident how different historiographical perspectives had influenced the way in which the art works were classified and exhibited. The diverse points of view of Colombian historians to colonial art and culture during the last ten years have determined changes in the curatorial processes that one should examine in order to better understand the historiographical perspectives that were dominant during those years. Not only could we take a journey from iconography to anthropology, but we could also see the tensions between social history, cultural history, and postcolonial studies that have taken place in the museum. This produces an interesting phenomenon: the exhibition space was transformed into a thinking space. With this in mind, the following article has two main purposes: First, to present different historiographical approaches and their influence on Museography during those years; and second, to explain how curatorship has become a medium to criticize different discourses around both colonial art and culture in Colombia.

Keywords: Historiography, museography, art, pictures, colonial museum.

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Historiografía y museografía en el Museo Colonial de Bogotá (1999-2012)

RESUMEN

Durante la última década restauradores, artistas e investigadores en varias áreas de las ciencias sociales han trabajado colectivamente en la reconstrucción de los espacios de exhibición del Museo Colonial de Bogotá, y han convertido este lugar en una suerte de laboratorio de indagación sobre la cultura y la sociedad colonial en la Nueva Granada y en América. Cuando se recorren las diferentes salas del museo que fueron abiertas al público entre 2005 y 2012, es evidente cómo diferentes perspectivas historiográficas han influenciado la labor curatorial transformando la manera como las piezas se clasifican y exhiben. Así, es posible hacer un recorrido que va desde la iconografía hasta la antropología de la imagen, o también rastrear las tensiones que existen entre la historia social, la historia cultural y los estudios poscoloniales. Estos contrastes producen un interesante fenómeno: transformar el espacio de exhibición en un espacio de pensamiento. Partiendo de tal afirmación, esta conferencia tiene dos propósitos: el primero, consiste en presentar las diferentes perspectivas historiográficas que han influenciado la curaduría del museo durante los últimos años. El segundo, busca caracterizar la labor curatorial como un medio eficaz para criticar los diferentes tipos de discursos sobre el arte y la cultura colonial escritos en Colombia durante las últimas décadas.

Palabras clave: museografía, historiografía, arte, imagen, museo colonial.

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RESUMO

Durante a última década os restauradores, artistas e pesquisadores de diversas áreas das ciências sociais têm trabalhado coletivamente a reconstrução dos espaços de exibição do **Museu Colonial de Bogotá**, transformando o lugar em uma espécie de laboratório de pesquisa sobre a cultura e a sociedade colonial na “Nueva Granada” e na América. Quando se percorrem as diferentes salas do museu que foram abertas para a o público entre 2005 e 2012, é evidente como as diversas perspectivas historiográficas tem influenciado o trabalho curatorial transformando a maneira em que são classificadas as peças e são exibidas. Desse jeito, é possível fazer um percurso que vai desde a iconografia até a antropologia da imagem, ou também rastrear as tensões que existem entre a história social, a história cultural e os estudos pós-coloniais. Estes contrastes produzem um fenômeno interessante: transformar o espaço de exibição em um espaço de pensamento. A partir dessa afirmação, esta palestra tem dois objetivos: o primeiro consiste em apresentar as diferentes perspectivas historiográficas que tem influenciado o curador do museu nestes últimos anos. O segundo procura caracterizar o trabalho curatorial como um meio eficaz para avaliar ou não os diferentes tipos de alocações sobre a arte e a cultura colonial escritos na Colômbia durante as últimas décadas.

Palavras-chave: Museologia, a historiografia, arte, imagem, museu colonial.

I. COLONIAL ART HISTORIOGRAPHY: A BRIEF SUMMARY

The first historical approach to Colonial Art in Colombia dates back to the mid nineteenth century.¹ The historian José Manuel Groot (1800-1878) wrote a biography of seventeenth century painter, Gregorio Vásquez de Arce y Ceballos and published it in 1859. Some years later, the artist and journalist Alberto Urdaneta (1845-1887) was one of the first people who took down the painter's religious canvases from the walls of the churches and showed them as art pieces in the first annual Exhibition of Fine Arts, celebrated in Bogotá in 1886.² This concept of colonial visual culture was intimately linked to politics, since the construction of a national identity demanded the presence of social icons and a local artistic tradition. In those circumstances the myth of Gregorio Vásquez was born. Along with the exhibition of his paintings, some hagiographic articles about his life were published.

The second kind of historical approaches to colonial art arose out of another context. The creation of a private organization called the Fine Arts Circle in 1920 (*Círculo de Bellas Artes*), and the development of the

School of Fine Arts of Bogotá, renewed the attention to colonial art and artists. In 1926 the painter Roberto Pizano Restrepo (1891-1927) published another book about Gregorio Vásquez. Later on, he encouraged painters like Francisco Antonio Cano, Ricardo Gómez Campuzano, and Ricardo Acevedo Bernal to make the first inventory of the artistic patrimony of the nation, which finally came out in 1934. As Alvaro Medina affirms in his book *Art processes in Colombia (Procesos del arte en Colombia, 1978)*, during the 1920's these artists looked for the opportunity to create an art market in order to have the possibility of exhibiting their works independently.

Likewise, it was necessary to consolidate the social and academic role of the School of Fine Arts of Bogotá. The purchase of colonial paintings and sculptures, along with a collection of copies of European artworks, was a way to legitimize this institution. In fact, there is a portrait made by Francisco Antonio Cano called *El secretario de la Escuela de bellas artes o Eugenio Peña, 1929* (Eugenio Peña, The secretary of the school of Fine Arts), that Olga Acosta analyzes, showing how the school could improve its precarious conditions during the decade of the twenties, due to a budget given by the government. Behind the man who deals with documents, this painting shows different works of art and copies that were presumably a matter of pride for the School.

The third significant moment of the study and conservation of colonial patrimony in Colombia is represented in the work of Gabriel Giraldo Jaramillo and Guillermo Hernández de Alba, composed between the thirties and the fifties. Both of them set

1 This brief summary is based on Marta Fajardo's de Rueda book *Colonial Art in la Nueva Granada from the point of view of an iconographic and iconological study (El arte colonial Neogranadino a la luz del estudio iconográfico e iconológico, 1999)*.

2 'Allí están expuestos los trabajos de los alumnos de Escuela de Bellas Artes, que dirige el señor Urdaneta en muchos de los cuales se revelan vocaciones artísticas. Las señoras han contribuido también con su precioso contingente, y los particulares se han apresurado á enviar sus colecciones. De los templos se han llevado varias de las obras del divino Vásquez, nuestra gloria nacional, y algunas de artistas extranjeros, con el bondadoso beneplácito del Ilustrísimo Señor Arzobispo'. Available from: http://www.banrepcultural.org/sites/default/files/lablaa/historia/paperi/v5/v5_106.pdf.

the basis for a more thoroughly documented historical research. Jaramillo 'elaborated lengthy bibliographies about different subjects related to Colombia; he studied carefully the testimonies of the nineteenth century travelers. He also registered and documented the works of various Colombian artists since the Colony and published numerous books and articles on artistic processes in Colombia' (Fajardo, 1999, p.20). From his side, Hernandez de Alba, a former member of the Colombian Academy of History, dedicated a great amount of his work to Bogota's cultural and artistic history. He also wrote books for children about the Discovery of America. The works of these historians correspond to the creation of the Colonial Museum of Bogotá, in 1942. Liberal president Eduardo Santos sponsored this initiative, which was accomplished with the support of essayist and historian, Germán Arciniegas, and the artist and curator, Teresa Cuervo.

Set up in the ancient 'Casa de las aulas' (house of classrooms) of the Jesuits, and located in the historic area of *La Candelaria*, this place welcomed the first generation of professional art historians that came from abroad. Spanish historian Marco Dorta³ had a very good impression of the Museum: 'I haven't seen in the American countries where I have been, a museum such as this one. It is hard to find a place exhibiting so many works of art of the Viceroyalty. Canvases, sculptures, furniture, silver work, fabrics, etc.' (Sebastián, 2006, p.99). Other journalists, artists, and adventurers

came to Colombia during this period and settled here, developing careers as historians. That was the case of Pole Juan Friede (1901-1990) whose works are still relevant, because of his usage of archive documents from Seville to rewrite the social history of the Conquer. Friede fought for the rights of indigenous tribes that had been driven out of their lands. He also edited and published an enormous amount of essential documents to understand these historical events and processes from a point of view that hadn't been conceived of because the heroic Hispanic narrative of the Conquer still dominated the minds of many Colombian historians.

In the field of art history of the Colony during these years, it is also necessary to mention the painter Luis Alberto Acuña (1904-1994), and the architect Carlos Arbeláez (1916-1969). Acuña was the director of the Colonial Museum from 1954 to 1964. In 1932 he published an essay about religious sculpture in Santafé and in 1964, the first dictionary of colonial artists (1964). Likewise, Acuña did important restorations such as mural paintings for the house of Juan de Vargas, in Tunja. According to Giraldo Jaramillo, Acuña was the first to understand those murals, which consequently opened a way of interpretation for such historians as the German, Erwin Walter Palm (Acuña, 1964, p.6). Arbeláez, who studied architecture and planning in New York, London, and Paris, also carried out important research in colonial architecture, aside from his labor in urbanism in Bogotá. He was also worried about conservation and the valuation of architectural patrimony in Colombia. He started to work with Argentinean historian Mario Buschiazzo, on the

3 Spanish historian, Diego Angulo Iniguez influenced Marco Dorta, and also worked together with him and the Argentinian, Mario Buschiazzo in a huge research about Hispano-American art and architecture, written between 1945 and 1956.

creation of an Institute in the Javeriana University, similar to the Aesthetics Research Institute of México, and the Institute of American Art, which Buschiazzo was leading in Buenos Aires at that time. In 1962 he was appointed director of the Colombian society of architects, and in 1964 he published a book entitled *Colonial Art in Colombia* in collaboration with Spanish historian Francisco Gil Tovar.

The role of Gil Tovar was also crucial. He arrived to Colombia in 1953 to give a few lectures in the National Library. Afterwards he started receiving new invitations from other institutions, and finally decided to stay in the country. He worked as a teacher and wrote and published a vast number of books regarding the history of art in Colombia (see: <http://www.colarte.com/colarte>). In a small catalog dated from 1954,⁴ Tovar described the architecture of the Colonial Museum and its exhibition room, as well as the history of the house since its construction during the seventeenth century, which was based on an architectural outline of Bautista Coluchini, a member of the Company of Jesus.

The description of Gil Tovar draws our attention because of two aspects: the first is the strong difference that exists between the ways in which the exhibition room was displayed back in the fifties and the strategies that are used nowadays. With the exception of a gallery devoted to the paintings and drawings of Gregorio Vásquez, in 1954 the pieces were exhibited focusing on its genres: 'At present there are eight rooms in use, wherein more than six hundred pieces are classified in different groups: drawings,

paintings, sculptures, carvings, silverware, furniture and other objects' (Gil, 1954, p.17). Gil Tovar criticized that kind of display because it showed a lack of reasoned principle regarding the classification of the objects. According to the author one could not distinguish the art from the craftsmanship, nor works that were valuable from an aesthetic point of view from those that were not. The second fact that draws attention has to do with the atmosphere of the house, because it is still almost the same as previously described. Reading Gil Tovar's description of the building gives us the impression that we are visiting it today: the peaceful and melancholic upper and lower galleries that cloistered the 'patio' on three of its four sides; the anarchic nature of the garden; the dominant presence of the fountain where the popular stone sculpture known as 'El mono de la pila' rests, etc.

To finish this brief summary of Colombian historiography of Colonial art, it is worth mentioning the work that Santiago Sebastian undertook between the sixties and the nineties. Even though this period was considered, by Marta Fajardo, as an unfruitful time for the studies of colonial art in Colombia, the research done by Sebastian across the country in relation to unrecognized colonial patrimony was very significant. After finishing a doctorate with Diego Angulo Íñiguez in Spain in 1961, Sebastian decided to come to Colombia. He settled down in Cali, and there he worked as a teacher and started research on the architecture of the city as well as Popayán's. Between 1961 and 1963 he had the opportunity to work with Mario Buschiazzo and Marco Dorta when they came to Colombia, and years later he co-wrote and published a book with

4 This catalogue includes a version of the text in English and French.

Carlos Arbeláez. Afterwards he traveled to the United States and studied in Yale under the guidance of George Kubler. Finally he went back to Spain, where unfortunately he could not dedicate himself to his research on colonial American art with the same possibilities and enthusiasm.

The work of Sebastian is relevant for many reasons. Not only did he establish in a clearer way the influence of Renaissance and Mannerism in American art, but he also questioned the different principles that the formalistic viewpoint of architecture had defended. In that regard, he reconsidered the term 'mudéjar' (Moorish), and also criticized the fact that many historians did not take into account the differences between Spain and the New Continent. Likewise, as affirmed by Ramón Gutierrez, Sebastian also redefined the notion of *mestizaje* (mixture) by avoiding the ethnic sense of the word and instead thinking of it in a cultural sense. For him it was necessary to recognize expressive values of American traditions that had influenced art and architecture in a profound way (Sebastian, 2006, p.43). Other contributions made by Sebastian dealt with the influence of historians, like Argentinian Hector Schenone, in relation to the identification of the sources of many paintings and decorative motifs in American art, as well as in German, Italian, and Flemish engravings and stamps. His knowledge in the field of emblematic baroque treatises was remarkable.

Over the last twenty years, the work of the Colombian historian, Marta Fajardo has been useful for young historians and conservators devoted to Colonial Art, for different reasons. First of all, in her book *Art in the New Grenade from the point of view of*

an iconographic and iconological study (1999), Fajardo reviews the ways Colonial art and architecture have been studied since the nineteenth century. Secondly, she addresses different topics that have been discussed and considered during several decades by art historians and restorers. In reference to the difficulties and the guidelines to study colonial art, she mentions the stylistic diversity of Spain in the time of the Discovery of America, the encounter between cultures during the Conquer, and the role of art as a medium to evangelize. On the other hand, the author refers to different sources through which the iconography of different works of art can be identified: the engravings, the treatises of art, the books of emblems, and the religious texts. Likewise Fajardo remarks that the research in the archives is also useful to find facts about how European artistic traditions developed in the local contexts of America.

II. THE MYTH OF THE ARTIST AND THE TALE OF THE CRAFTSMAN: FROM HAGIOGRAPHIC HISTORY TO SOCIAL AND CULTURAL HISTORY.

The aforementioned summary about historiography of Colonial art allowed us to see where and when the contemporary historians and restorers started thinking of the curatorship of the museum collections. The exhibition room displaying Gregorio Vásquez de Arce y Ceballos, opened to the public in 2005, and was the first significant effort made with the intention of recreating and partly deconstructing one of the most popular topics of traditional art historiography

since the nineteenth century: the figure of the artist.

Influenced by Vasari's widely recognized book about Renaissance artists, colonial art historiography had similarly created an aura around Vásquez that needed to be questioned: 'The painter's biography was created out of a few documents, some oral stories collected within one century and a half after his death, and a lot of assumptions and false anecdotes' (Toquica et al., 2008, p.117). Three years after the exhibition opened its doors, the Museum published a book entitled *The craft of the painter: new perspectives about Gregorio Vásquez's work (El oficio del pintor: nuevas miradas a la obra de Gregorio Vásquez)*. This book is an anthology of articles about the painter and the time he lived in, written by contemporary historians, artists, and conservators.

A common aspect of both the book and the exhibition relates to the social identity of Vásquez and the artistic value of his work. Should we consider him as an artist or as a craftsman? Can we affirm, as previous art historiography has done several times, that his work has an artistic value? Or, should we accept that his paintings and drawings are worthless from an aesthetic point of view? These questions have to do with the act of painting. One could question whether in the canvases made by Vásquez we can spot an expression of free will, or rather whether they were completely subjected to a tradition full of prescriptions. To find these and more answers we also have to take into account different approaches to the painter's work and biography. In this case we face a paradox: since the book about Vásquez struggles against the hagiographic

version of the painter's life, the curatorship of the exhibition room, perhaps indirectly, reinforces the myth of the artist.

At the entrance, the exhibition room stages a recreation of a painter's atelier during the XVII century in the city of Santafé. Everything placed there creates an atmosphere: the presence of art treatises over the tables and the engravings hanged on the walls; the colors and utensils that combine European and native traditional knowledge; the preparation of the canvases made with the linen in which commodities that came from Europe were wrapped, etc. This simulation is based on the first article of the book, in which Oscar Guarín tried to reconstruct a social history of painters in the context of Vásquez. The author remarks that sons inherited the craft of the painters mainly from their fathers, and that a few Spanish families controlled the most important ateliers in the city.

The age of initiation to become a painter ranged between the ages of eight and ten years old. Moreover, while the apprentice was under the guidance of his master, the latter was committed not only to teach the craft but also to raise his pupil, as if he was his own son. Even though these agreements seem very informal to us, every aspect related to them was legalized through a contract established between the painter and the parents of the pupil. Searching in the archives, Guarín found out about several legal processes in which painters were accused for not teaching their craft to their apprentices and instead forced them to do domestic duties. In that sense Guarín tried to demonstrate that ateliers in Santafé were far from being spaces where the ideal of the

artist as a creator could be developed. 'The colonial painters of Santafé during the XVII century, lived and died like craftsmen. If they had managed to improve their condition in such a rigid social structure, it was a consequence of other activities different from painting' (Toquica et al., 2008, p.30). Ironically, the space set up in the Museum to reconstruct the research done by Guarín creates a romantic atmosphere in which visitors can dream of an idyllic past.

As the social conditions were restraining creativity, at the same time several prescriptions controlled the elaboration of paintings and sculptures. The article 'Vásquez and the environment of baroque painting', by the historian, Jaime Borja shows the influence of the Counter Reform over the production of religious images during the Colony in America. The Council of Trent, and the synodic dispositions stipulated the rules of the creation of images. The context in which the work of Vásquez was produced followed those rules strictly. Likewise, religious paintings couldn't be produced or exhibited without the verdict of the church and the Royal Audience. Borja quotes different documents from the XVI, XVII, and XVIII century in which the authorities issued a permission to allow their production and exhibition. On the other hand, according to the art treatises, paintings had to adapt to a visual rhetoric in order to teach, delight, and make the people feel pity.⁵

Keeping in mind these circumstances, do we have to consider that everything said about Vásquez during the XIX century was an invention? A painting that is exhibited at the end of the exhibition room illustrates the problem. It is a huge canvas, currently entitled *Abbot Joaquin de Fiore, delivered the portraits of Santo Domingo and San Francisco*. The XIX century historiography interpreted this picture as a self-portrait of the painter delivering two canvases of Saint Francis and Saint Dominic to the Augustinian monks. That way of considering the painting converted it in a manifestation of the artist, who wanted to be recognized. Nevertheless, Schenone denied this interpretation and declared that the iconography of this painting recreates the moment when Joaquin de Fiore, a Calabrian monk, delivered the portraits of two unknown Saints to the San Marc's basilica in Venice. According to Christian history, Fiore, who lived between 1130 and 1203, had predicted the creation of two religious orders as the ones that would spread the word of God across the world. Afterwards, Franciscans and Dominicans read Fiore's prophecies as an anticipation of their presence. Which of this painting's interpretations is correct?

The answer to this question could be that both ways of interpreting the image are accurate. Vásquez could have set out to recreate Fiore's legend and at the same time he could have assumed it as a self-portrait. If he had to deal with the mystery of the trinity with three faces, as proved by his canvas about this subject, he surely could have understood the strangeness of his own situation. A situation that made him a craftsman but also allowed him to be conscious of the artist's individuality. Sometimes social and

5 'The classical rhetoric, assimilated during the XVII and XVIII century, proposed five parts so the discourse, in this case visual, was persuasive: *Inventio* (the use of arguments that make the cause plausible) *dispositio* (order and distribution of the subjects), *elocutio* (proper way of presenting the discourse) *memoria* (remembrance of the sense of things) and *pronuntiatio*' (Toquica et al., 2005, p.42).



Símbolo de la Trinidad (63 x 48 cm) 1665 detail.
Photograph: Daniel García



Símbolo de la Trinidad (detail before the restoration)
Image from the book *El Oficio del pintor*.

cultural history sees the past as though it had just one dimension, but the sources reveal the opposite. These canvases about the trinity and Joaquin de Fiore show that the way Christianity considered the time and

the identity were much more complex than the way contemporary social sciences do.

The *Trinity's symbol* presents the enigma of three people that are simultaneously one.⁶ This paradox illustrated in the painting makes us question whether the discussion about Vásquez's identity as an artist or as a craftsman is worthwhile. Could his acts mean free will and submission at the same time? As a matter of fact, in traditional societies, the action of supreme freedom can be identified with the action of renunciation of oneself. Assuming this, one could consider that the deconstruction and the criticism of the myth of the artist are nothing else but a way of reaffirming it. The fact that two of three faces of this Trinity were covered for a long time and reappeared as a consequence of a restoration done in 1988 poses a question: are history and curatorship ready to confront a past full of ambiguities, or do they prefer to make it up so that it would only show one of its different faces? The bipolarity of images and also of historical time can be discovered in the other collections of the museum.

III. FROM VIOLENCE TO DEVOTION: ICONOGRAPHY AND CULT

Displayed by historians Sigrid Castañeda and Carlos Rojas in 2007, the two collections that were welcoming the visitors were called *Towards a New World* and *Evangelization*. Both of them displayed the influence of Santiago Sebastian, Marta Fajardo and Hector Schenone, because the works of art

⁶ The father is not the son, the son is not the Holy Spirit and the Holy Spirit is not the father either, but at the same time god is the father, god is the son and god is the Holy spirit.

were selected and exhibited according to iconographical, stylistic, and geographical points of view. In the first place, three wooden columns were set up in front of the entrance door to make us think of the American baroque as a culture of synthesis, where styles and traditions were mixed until they became almost unrecognizable. An interesting essay written by Sebastian about the different types of columns that were used during the Colony in altarpieces, and in religious and profane architecture on the territory of Colombia (Sebastián, 2006, pp.208-253) illustrates this peculiar aspect. More than eighty variations of the classical motifs of columns led Sebastian to quote a sentence of Luis Díez del Corral that beautifully summarizes the changing process of European art and architecture in America: 'Columns, in the same fashion as Hellenic myths and fables, jump across Western history, suffering tremendous experiences that torture, rip and destroy their vibrating bodies' (ibid., p.253)

Afterwards one could find canvases of virgins and martyrs coming from Italian or Flemish schools as well as iconographic types inherited from old Seville traditions. There were two main reasons for this selection. The first was to show, as Fajardo (year of book) did in her book, the different sources and styles that converged in Spanish visual culture during the Discovery of America. The second was to remark the profound contrasts and tensions that characterized Spanish baroque as a culture of devotion, but at the same time as a culture of seduction. The painting of *La Virgen de la Antigua* had a strong cult since the Christians defeated the Mussulmen in Seville (Schenone, 2008, p.300). Afterwards it became the

first image of devotion in the New Continent around 1510 (Acosta, 2011, p.35). That painting is in clear contrast with the canvas of Maria Magdalena punishing herself in a sort of luxury and erotic atmosphere. To finish the exhibition room *Towards a New World*, Rojas and Castañeda decided to exhibit the Saints who represent the different orders, which came to El Nuevo Reino de Granada between 1549 and 1590: Saint Francis, Saint Dominic, Saint Ignacio, Saint Clara, etc.

In the next collection named *Evangelization* the strategies of classification and exhibition changed. Its intention was to show how this visual culture was adapted in America. That's why a little stamp, that represented the sacred family, appeared next to a canvas as an example of how engravings were copied all over the American territory. Likewise in this exhibition room was displayed one of the most pathetic European martyrs, like the penitent San Peter from Alcantara, or Peter Ortiz from Zárata, who died trying to convert natives to Christianity. Furthermore there were some small crucifixes that presumably belonged to doctrinaire priests. The iconographic tradition embodied the most important social institutions and also the role models of Christianity.

Were these collections a transposition of the same topics and perspectives of the colonial art history written in the second half of the twentieth century? Some can say yes. Nevertheless, at the same time that Rojas and Castañeda inherited the topics from the previous colonialists, they looked at colonial art from a different standpoint, influenced by contemporary art and historiography. Understanding the encounter and the

mixture of native and European visual cultures during the Conquer and the Colony only in artistic terms was barely acceptable. One could affirm that the way of seeing those cultural processes like a war of images, as the French historian Serge Gruzinski proposed it, affected the curatorship of this exhibition room (Gruzinski, 1994). 'Because images and writings were one of the main instruments of European culture, the huge enterprise of westernization that swooped down on the American continent, adopted [...] the form of a war of images that has lasted centuries and still today doesn't seem to finish' (Gruzinski, 1994, p.12). As well as the book of Gruzinski, the artworks of the Colombian artist José Alejandro Restrepo and the research done by historian Jaime Borja, have definitively changed Rojas and Castañeda's point of view of the colonial baroque. Behind the method of classifying works of art following geographic and iconographic processes, the presence of violence was the hidden thread of the whole guideline of this exhibition room.

Contemporary historian Jaime Borja remarked that baroque culture considered the human body of the saints as a theatrical character, where mortification was a way of purification. 'The main purpose of transforming the body into a theater was the construction of docile subjects that would form a mystic body, the social body, useful in a society dominated by an absolute monarchy and its overseas reigns like La Nueva Granada' (Habeas Corpus, 2010, p.11). Images of suffering bodies on the canvas of the *Decapitation of John the Baptist*, or the little wooden sculpture of *San Pedro de Alcantara*, pretended to reveal the truthful condition of pain beyond appearances, and also

represented a pathos that would make the observer feel sympathy. According to Borja (ref. year), Baroque culture strengthens social ties using violence.

On the other hand, the contemporary artist José Alejandro Restrepo, based on his research on the works of Aby Warburg, discovered that some of the *Pathosformeln* presented in various martyr's baroque paintings existed also in some of the worst practices of violence during the decades of 1950 and 1960 in Colombia. These practices that created a theater of horror, which threatened the population, pursued the opposite purpose: to disintegrate the social tissue to the point of creating a polarized society in opposite political parties, and ultimately driving out the people from their land. That strange relation between the past and the present, and between violence and religion, was a subject that surely influenced the way Sigrid Castañeda and Carlos Rojas reevaluated Colonial Art.

What can be concluded from the contrast between the iconological method inherited by Schenone, Sebastian, and Fajardo, and from the approaches of contemporary historians and artists? The curatorship conducted by Sigrid Castañeda and Carlos Rojas revealed not only the violence that took place during the Conquer and the Colony, but also another kind of violence that is implicit in the method established by Erwin Panofsky in the middle of the twentieth century. French art historian, George Didi-Huberman, criticizes Panofsky's theory of art history as a humanistic discipline, because it forced him to deny the brutality that can be expressed through images and art. As Didi Huberman affirms, he 'forbade himself- and forbade

the history of art- from seeing, or rather confronting the moment when images do violence, are themselves acts of violence [...]. But to this Panofsky turned his back, ready to risk disembodiment a part of the objects that he studied' (Didi-Huberman, 2005, p.117).⁷

On the other hand, iconography and iconology always search for the meaning of the artworks, but at the same time they produce a reduction of their interpretations. Ignoring issues as the presence of the color in the paintings is like converting a body into a ghost. That use of iconography is a consequence of different inheritances. First of all, Rojas and Castañeda organized these two collections using inventories and catalogues made by former directors of the Museum, where all the pieces were represented in black and white photographs. Likewise the version of iconology that Marta Fajardo acknowledged was the one of Panofsky. She barely knew Aby Warburg's approaches to art and images, and almost no one in Colombia knew about him during the twentieth century. As a matter of fact, Fajardo affirms in her 1999 book that Warburg was an English teacher, perhaps confused because of the fact that the Warburg Institute migrated to London in 1933. In that sense, the guideline of the exhibition rooms *Towards a new world* and *Evangelization* unconsciously reflected, with their selections and classifications of paintings and sculptures, the violence implicit in a method that forces to

impress invisible meanings in visual forms: virgins, female and male martyrs, founders of religious orders, European vs. American pieces, etc. Didi-Huberman states that:

Along this bias, the history of art in a sense expanded the knowledge of which its object is susceptible (and even requires) – but in another sense it informed its object with its method, its specific form of expression, which is conceptual, never looking for anything but signification, and, accordingly, manipulating “literary sources” endlessly. Thus did objects of the history of art undergo a kind of ordeal by disembodiment: the colors of painting were required – a requirement that would long remain in force- to say “yes” or “no” with regard to a work’s “theme”, “concept” or “literary source”; in short, they had to decline themselves in black or white. ... Iconology, then, delivered up all images to the tyranny of the concept, of definition, and, ultimately of the nameable and the legible: the legible understood as synthetic, iconological operation, whereby invisible “themes”, “invisible general and essential tendencies of the human mind” – invisible concepts or ideas – are “translated” into the realm of the visible (ibid., p.122).

Afterwards these two exhibition rooms were closed and changed completely. The historians Olga Acosta and Juan Pablo Cruz created their correspondent replacement. This new collection received the title *From the Enclosure to the Museum*, because the paintings were placed in the Saint Inés convent of Bogotá. Thanks to this opportunity,

⁷ 'The history of art, when it calls itself a "humanistic discipline", does nothing but appeal to synthesis, but conjured away all of the violence, deception and "inhumanity" that images are- and always have been- able to foment. The history of art as a "humanistic discipline" does nothing but trace a magic circle, within which it closes in on itself, pacifies itself, and recreates images in the image of its own thought: its humanistic Idea of art' (ibid., p.117)

the criteria of selection and exhibition were influenced by another historical perspective: the religious practice of the cult. This new viewpoint of colonial art was influenced by Olga Acosta's research in her doctorate studies in Dresden University. Last year Acosta published a book entitled *Miraculous Marian images in El Nuevo Reino de Granada*. This book has enabled the creation of new perspectives of study, since it has opened the possibility to focus not on meanings but on the usage of images. According to Acosta, the studies of colonial American art in Colombia have hardly taken into account phenomena such as the miraculous power of images or their capacity to heal; facts that were essential to create an aura around them during the Conquer and the Colony. This kind of approach was probably 'motivated by the research done during the last two decades by David Freedberg, Hans Belting (with his book *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art*), and in the case of America, Serge Gruzinski' (Acosta, 2011, p.84).

If the previous exhibition rooms informed us about the role of images in the violent enterprise of the westernization of the new continent, the newer ones emphasize on how Christian visual culture was adapted and recreated in America. That doesn't mean Acosta ignored the social and cultural conflict between Europeans and natives during the Conquer and the Colony. On the contrary, her book reconstructs all the plunder suffered by tribes when Gonzalo Jiménez de Quesada and his men arrived to the American territory. She also discusses the different strategies of classification of native rites and sacred objects made by Europeans in order to create a hierarchy that



Virgen del Carmen. Museo Colonial. Detail.
Photograph: Daniel García

would allow them to destroy other traditions that were different from theirs. Based on Gruzinski's approaches to this matter, she refers to the different names that indigenous ritual objects received. Firstly they were coined as 'zemies', because they had very different meanings and were used for various purposes. Afterwards they were called 'fetishes', 'idols', or 'simulacra' to denounce a pagan cult only useful to pray for basic needs such as, for example, food. Finally, they were considered as demons or false images. In that sense '...the chroniclers justified the looting of tombs and sanctuaries seeing those acts as fair and necessary within the process of redemption' (Acosta, 2011, p.63). According to Acosta and Gruzinski, those different denominations were a way to eliminate the similarity that was in the base of the native and European societies: the cult of images.

This strong similarity led Acosta to think that the manifestations of miracles through paintings and sculptures during the first period of the Colony not only pretended to

evangelize natives, but also to diminish the cruelty of the Europeans that had recently arrived (Acosta, 2011, p.90). In that sense images also performed the role of protectors and maybe that was the main reason of their devotion. Historically speaking, the fact that miracles usually take place when critical situations are happening is a clue to understanding why images, which traveled all around the continent, were useful mediums of God's manifestation. Likewise, one could affirm that if a Christian iconography exists, so too does a narrative, which explains how the prodigy is expressed through images. Stories like the one of *La Virgen de Chiquinquirá*, which still today has a strong devotion from the people, describe all the processes, including supernatural events, as well as a complete renewal of the painting:

From the second half of the XVI century in El Nuevo Reino de Granada, images that sent out brightness or flew and moved, took part in the typology of the initial miracle that transformed several Marian paintings and sculptures in images with healing powers [...]. On the one hand, supernatural events usually happened in a profane or an inhospitable place, which soon will be declared sacred, as well as in recently founded churches or hermits. On the other hand, events had to occur in presence of witnesses, between we usually find Christians, natives and children' (Acosta, 2011, p.91).

To illustrate these appropriations and receptions of religious images during different periods of the Colony, the art pieces selected by Acosta and Cruz intended to reflect how devotion and the cult transformed

the initial appearances of the images. The Virgin from Carmen, who still today has a cult mostly consisting of bus and truck drivers, appears in a little canvas turned into a queen, as a consequence of a great amount of ornaments that decorate her and Jesus. Moreover, we can find a Suckling Madonna bejeweled with an earring and a version of *La Virgen de Chiquinquirá* ornamented with crowns and exhibited with candles to recreate the atmosphere of the cult. Something similar happened with reproductions. A copy of a canvas representing Angel Saint Michael made by Raphael Sanzio, printed by Nicolas de Larmessin III, is almost unrecognizable because of the clothes and ornaments that decorate the figure.

On the other hand, in this new collection there are paintings that have suffered various types of damage due to their use over decades or even centuries. According to the guideline produced by Acosta and Cruz, even though the nuns of the Convent of Saint Inés made great effort taking care of the paintings, the way they did so wasn't always the best. Canvases hung from broomsticks and stained by candles or as consequence of moisture, are the proofs of a long story that almost destroyed them. In that sense, the Museum presents itself as the agent of a new secular 'miracle': not the one of the renewal of images, but the one of their conservation and restoration. Ironically, one could affirm that the curatorship of these new exhibition rooms recreates the narrative of the miracle without mentioning it. Not, however, to reinforce the religious devotion, but to translate it into other terms and create the ritual of museum culture. As a matter of fact, there is a video framed like a baroque canvas next to the

paintings, showing the ancient convent of Saint Inés (which no longer exists), and also the work done by the Museum to protect the patrimony.

How can one think of a relationship between the polarized notions of religious images, which have been conceived to explain the role of Christian visual culture in Latin America? Sigrid Castañeda and Carlos Rojas highlighted one, which emphasized the violence of evangelization as the XVII century painting of Pedro Ortiz de Zarate shows. And there is another, as discussed by Olga Acosta and Juan Pablo Cruz, that accentuates the love of images expressed in their cult and devotion: made in the XIX century, a small canvas of San Martin de Porres illustrates great passion and tenderness. If one cannot find the answer in history, there is a clue to discovering it in the poetry. A poem by Charles Baudelaire entitled 'To a Madonna. Votive offering in the Spanish Style' illuminates this mystery:

À une Madone

Ex-voto dans le goût espagnol

Je veux bâtir pour toi, Madone, ma
maîtresse,
Un autel souterrain au fond de ma
détresse,
Et creuser dans le coin le plus noir de mon
coeur,
Loin du désir mondain et du regard
moqueur,
Une niche, d'azur et d'or tout émaillée,
Où tu te dresseras, Statue émerveillée.
Avec mes Vers polis, treillis d'un pur métal
Savamment constellé de rimes de cristal
Je ferai pour ta tête une énorme Couronne;
Et dans ma Jalousie, ô mortelle Madone

Je saurai te tailler un Manteau, de façon
Barbare, roide et lourd, et doublé de
soupçon,
Qui, comme une guérite, enfermera tes
charmes,
Non de Perles brodé, mais de toutes mes
Larmes!
Ta Robe, ce sera mon Désir, frémissant,
Onduleux, mon Désir qui monte et qui
descend,
Aux pointes se balance, aux vallons se
repose,
Et revêt d'un baiser tout ton corps blanc et
rose.
Je te ferai de mon Respect de beaux
Souliers
De satin, par tes pieds divins humiliés,
Qui, les emprisonnant dans une molle
étreinte
Comme un moule fidèle en garderont
l'empreinte.
Si je ne puis, malgré tout mon art diligent
Pour Marchepied tailler une Lune d'argent
Je mettrai le Serpent qui me mord les
entrailles
Sous tes talons, afin que tu foules et railles
Reine victorieuse et féconde en rachats
Ce monstre tout gonflé de haine et de
crachats.
Tu verras mes Penseurs, rangés comme les
Cierges
Devant l'autel fleuri de la Reine des
Vierges
Etoilant de reflets le plafond peint en bleu,
Te regarder toujours avec des yeux de feu;
Et comme tout en moi te chérit et t'admire,
Tout se fera Benjoin, Encens, Oliban,
Myrrhe,
Et sans cesse vers toi, sommet blanc et
neigeux,
En Vapeurs montera mon Esprit orageux.

Enfin, pour compléter ton rôle de Marie,
 Et pour mêler l'amour avec la barbarie,
 Volupté noire! des sept Péchés capitaux,
 Bourreau plein de remords, je ferai sept
 Couteaux
 Bien affilés, et comme un jongleur
 insensible,
 Prenant le plus profond de ton amour pour
 cible,
 Je les planterai tous dans ton Coeur
 pantelant,
 Dans ton Coeur sanglotant, dans ton Coeur
 ruisselant!

IV. THE 'MESTIZAJE' AS A LIMIT OF HISTORICAL THINKING

Next to these exhibition rooms there is a small one named 'Mestizaje' (Crossbreeding). The process of mixing native and Christian cultures has been a problem for art history since the first decades of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, the approaches taken have failed for different reasons. In the first place, the term is quite problematic since it implies, as Gruzinski insists, the notion of biological or cultural purity. On the other hand, it can easily be identified with a sort of exotic phenomenon that diminishes the view of the problem and can also create confusions: one cannot affirm that if a hybrid between animal and human appears in a wood carving, it is an influence of native American rites and divinities, related to Nature, because this motif could come from medieval or classical sources.

On the other hand the approaches made by iconography to this issue are valuable but also insufficient. We cannot deny the contributions made by Santiago Sebastian or Constanza Villalobos in regard to this subject.

They have looked for American zoomorphic and phytomorphic motifs in the works of art bringing interesting results. However, searching with scientific eyes for local fauna and flora in paintings and sculptures made in America is, in a metaphorical sense, like performing an autopsy to a living body. When one is in front of the anonymous seventeenth century wooden bas-relief of Jesus and Saint John, one doesn't deal with representations but with what appears to be living presences. Nature in this bas-relief is not a number of things that inhabit an open space, but the dilution of the limits between every singularity. It is something like a mock to the taxonomical or iconographical way of interpreting artworks. After contemplating this piece for a while, with some effort we can distinguish a lamb, a pig, an owl, and a monkey eating a fruit, some birds, and trees laden with nourishment. Nevertheless, at the same time everything mixes to the point that we cannot separate the vegetable from the animal: the trunks of the trees assume the form of human backbones, the fruits resemble cranes bathed in blood, and the roots are like snake nests.

If iconography faces a limit to interpret pieces like this bas-relief, something similar can be said about the perspective that intends to trace the religious cult of images during the Colony. There is a painting entitled, *Nuestra Señora de Monguá* in this collection that calls for our attention because of the way Saint Joseph has been represented: he looks exactly like a peasant of the current region of Monguá in Boyacá. Not only his clothes but also his facial features and gestures reveal strong similarities between the saint and the people from this area of the country. What could be the reason for this

resemblance? The case of the miraculous painting of *Nuestra Señora de Monguí* illustrates the problem. According to Acosta, a legend about this painting dated from the XVII century, describes how the caciques (indigenous authorities) of Sugamuxi and Monguí went to Spain to meet Felipe II in 1557, bringing gold and emeralds as presents for the king. In return he gave each of them a painting, one of which became miraculous. Such painting was devoted to the Virgin of Monguí.

An older tradition affirms that the king who gave them the canvases wasn't Felipe II but Carlos V, and that he was the one who painted the two images to express gratitude for the loyalty of the caciques. A variation of this story establishes that in honor of the natives, the king had represented Saint Joseph with dark skin. Afterwards in the XVIII century, Basilio Vicente de Oviedo refuted this version of the tale and explained that the dark tone of Saint Joseph's skin was due to an overshadowing effect in the picture. What do these different versions of the legend reveal? One could think that the first devotion of this image is related to the presence of Saint Joseph as a metaphor of a new authority model, but also as a father figure, and that its miraculous power wasn't just a matter of religion but also a matter of politics.

Once again, crossbreeding not only confronts us with the problem of the mixture of cultures, but also with everything that exists in some kind of a frontier that cannot be easily discriminated. The historical approaches of iconography, or the documental research about understanding the nature of miraculous images, failed to tackle some of



Jesús y San Juan Bautista. Taller Santaferenseño.
Siglo XVII Altorrelieve en madera policromada, estofada
y esgrafiada. 95 x 73 x 9 cm. Detail.
Photograph: Daniel García

the most important problems about colonial visual culture. We should develop a way of thinking that will enable us to blur the main boundaries established by historical methods: the ones that separate culture from nature, religion from politics, interiority from exteriority, and foremost the past from the present. Only questioning our current way of seeing things and our experiences of space and time, can we start imagining new approaches to the visual traditions which formed us.

V. POSTCOLONIAL STUDIES AND ANTHROPOLOGY OF IMAGES: TWO PERSPECTIVES OF THE XVIII CENTURY.

The next exhibition room, opened in 2010 can be considered a reaction to the previously mentioned demand. Carlos Rojas and his interdisciplinary working team intended to reconstruct a relationship between the present and the past, distant from those that the history offers (see: <http://curaduricolonial.wikispaces.com/>). This collection,

called *The game of identities before the Independence*, 'shows the emergence of new identities in La Nueva Granada during the XVIII century, the transformation of the notion of individuality and the place of old and new kinds of knowledge within society'. The display of this collection has a strong influence from postcolonial studies. Therefore, its way of approaching the past is not guided by epistemological reasons but by political ones. The book of Colombian philosopher Santiago Castro-Gomez titled *The hybris of point zero: science, race and Enlightenment in La Nueva Granada (1750-1816)* (2005) was a significant referent to this curatorship.

As Rojas affirms, this exhibition makes visitors think of their own present and the way they construct their identity. In that sense, Rojas and his team believe that the public should also 'assume an active role in the configuration of the past'. To turn this project into a reality, the curatorial work of this exhibition room exhibited the artworks in different settings that pretended to create an interaction between the objects and the public. According to Rojas, 'insofar as the Museums modify their ways of approaching the past, it will be possible to talk about a citizenship with historical consciousness. In this respect, these institutions have to learn to negotiate with the contemporary society without trying to dogmatize it'. Settings like a baroque altarpiece, in which instead of saints one can find national heroes, or a XVII century bed where a document that proves the purity of blood of a family is projected, are some examples of this kind of display.

Another thing that draws attention is the exhibition of a canvas about the defense of



Defensa de tesis de Francisco Antonio Moreno y Escandón, 1754 Image from the Colonial Museum archive

a thesis of law and theology. According to Oscar Romero, who analyzes different aspects of the painting, this artwork is a document to understand the way education was considered during the middle of the XVIII century in Santafé. First of all, the presence of Saint Teresa from Avila embodies a model of a Doctor of the Church. Accordingly, this painting wasn't only used to defend a thesis, but also to defend the catholic faith and the politics of the monarchy (see: <http://curaduriacolonial.wikispaces.com/>). In addition, the relationship between speech and writing showed in the Latin placards, illustrates the importance of rhetoric and scholasticism in higher education. Finally, the fact that the defender was Francisco Antonio Moreno y Escandón, a son of a Spanish man and a creole woman, explains the role of the University as an institution of social



Device. Photograph: Daniel García

legitimization. Moreno y Escandon served on various political positions, and when the Jesuits were driven out of the reign, he assumed the project of founding the public University. Relating to this, Castro-Gómez affirms: 'during the Colony Universities were a mechanism of legitimation of race purity as an inheritance of cultural capital' (Castro-Gómez, 2005, p.118).

Next to this canvas, there is a kind of device where the visitors are interrogated to see if they could enter university following the requirements that were established back in the XVII century. To play this game one has to answer yes or no, pushing either a green or red button. The questions have to do with place of birth, gender, ethnic origin, religion, etc. At the beginning, playing the game turns out to be funny since almost nobody has the chance to be accepted in the XVIII Century University. Nevertheless,

once the trick is discovered, everybody lies to the machine to be accepted. Giving these circumstances, what can one say about the strategies of this curatorship? In the first place, the design of an interactive device has a positive outcome because visitors start questioning the way universities were at the end of the Colony. Nevertheless, this questioning also vanishes when the visitor learns how to use the machine properly so he or she can 'win the game'. Furthermore almost nobody spots the canvas about the defense of the thesis because the light of the screen is much brighter and attractive.

It's ironic but something similar to this situation is currently happening with postcolonial studies. For instance, concepts like 'device',⁸ inherited from the works of Michel

8 A dispositive is a meshwork of relationships between heterogeneous elements; discourses, institutions, architecture, regulations, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical concepts,

Foucault, have become dangerous toys in the hands of other authors. The postcolonial conceptual jargon, as in cultural studies or gender studies, have been transformed into ends, when they were supposed to be mediums. Although the book of Castro-Gomez is remarkable, it suffers from precisely this limitation: when one is reading it, it seems like the presence of a source only matters if it supports a concept or a theory. That usage of history impoverishes our image of the past. Something similar happens in this exhibition room. Even though the visitor realizes that the past is not a thing to contemplate but a process to recreate, the artworks and pieces of colonial culture remain hidden behind the sets where they are exhibited.

Perhaps, in reaction to this kind of display, the next collection called *A life to contemplate: unknown collection of Santa Inés paintings*, followed a completely different approach to the artworks. Here the intention was to exhibit the pieces respecting the way they were shown when painted. This collection of canvases that narrates the life of Santa Inés de Montepulciano belonged to a female Dominican convent, which had a significant role during the Colony in Santafé. The building where it was stored, was demolished between 1956 and 1957, and many colonial art pieces lost their original place of exhibition. As a consequence, the work of restoration, research, and displaying the pieces made by the crew of the Museum, intended to rescue their original meaning and reception. In that sense, this curatorship took distance not only from the postcolonial

strategies but also from the way the history of art classified its material.

The distance from the previous methods of exhibition shows an influence of what Hans Belting defines as anthropology of images. According to the author, visual cultures need a history different from the one art historiography has proposed, since its methods of analysis are very limited. One has to face the experience of death to understand the basic motivation of the production of images. It could be argued then that what Belting proposed is an anthropological way of considering images that combine three aspects: picture, medium, and body. Human beings are not the masters of images but the places where images live. As he claims, 'Internal and external representations, or mental and physical images, may be considered two sides of the same coin' (Belting, 2007, p.264).

Following this theory, the curatorship made by historians, Olga Acosta and Laura Vargas, as well as the interesting research done by Constanza Toquica about the life of the convent of Santa Clara, allow us to recreate not just the iconography of this collection of paintings, but also their existential meaning within conventual female life. According to Toquica's book *In the absence of gold: lineage, credit and salvation*, (2008) besides their religious role, female convents in La Nueva Granada performed other significant social functions. Spanish families put their daughters in the convent to protect their blood purity and also to have the possibility to get loans from the convent. During the XVII and XVIII century the circulating currency was much more lower than it is today, and despite the fact that noble families had properties and lands, they didn't

moral values, and everyday practices. The meshwork between these heterogeneous elements is a response to an emergence and its functionality is strategic (Castro, 2011,p.114).



Bautismo de Santa Inés de Montepulciano. Maestro de la serie de Santa Inés de Montepulciano. Óleo sobre tela, 243 x 155 cm Ca. 1775 Colección particular. Image from the Colonial Museum archive

always have the currency to make business and increase their capital. In that sense female convents also played the role of banks, lending money in exchange for mortgages to the families that had their daughters living as cloistered nuns.

It is necessary to be aware of the risk of considering these paintings in relation to that reality, but after contemplating the whole collection it is inevitable to notice aspects that seem odd. The baptism of Santa Inés is mortifying, because it shows her as a little doll between the adults who participate in the act. The canvas that narrates how Santa

Inés is attacked by ravens because the place where she would establish her convent was a brothel, make us think about the hidden relationship of these spaces. The mystic elevation of the saint shows her as if she was spying on the outside world through a small hole. And finally in her consecration as prelate of the convent, one of the altar boys looks at her flower crown with a gesture of irony. Could that gaze be related to the fact that she would die soon in the convent, and her corpse would have the same crown? Could this collection of paintings be considered not just as a hagiographic life example of Christianity, but also as a medium to transform the female human body into a sanctified commodity for the colonial economic system? At the same time that the Catholic Church and the Spanish monarchy were fighting to maintain a pureblooded and untouched and Christian faith, world capitalism was emerging with all its power. Could this collection be considered as a threshold where these experiences were learning how to coexist as inner images of the colonial social body?

VI. SCULPTURES AND 'BARGUEÑOS': BACK TO THE BEGINNING?

Finally, it is worth mentioning the exhibition devoted to sculpture, the last room that was opened in the past years. First, the criterion of its selection and exhibition doesn't seem to follow any of the contemporary historiographical perspectives, but the old ones, separating the works of art according to their correspondent genres. Can this decision be considered a return to a museographical practice that wants to avoid social,

cultural, and political problems related to the construction of the colonial past? It is unpredictable because every present has its own way to deal with historical time; now that the museum has been closed for a long period and it's going to be completely reformed, one hopes that its new conception reflects the difficulties implicit in the reconstruction of colonial history and culture.

Nevertheless this new sculpture room doesn't give us a clue of what the future will look like for the museum. It is a shame that the historians and conservators that worked on this curatorship did not think about the relationship between the sculptures and the objects that were exhibited before in the same space. Perhaps it would have been a better approach if the *bargueños*, these delicate and ornamented pieces of furniture made of wood and full of drawers, had a place next to the sculptures. What would the reason be to combine such different

kinds of objects? The creation of America reinvented at the same time the sacred and the profane. Here, some of the divine manifestations became blasphemous and also, in several cases, the impious was sanctified. There is a work of art that embodies these tensions, because its shape is halfway between the religious image and the furniture, and its usage between the frivolous marionette show and the sacred history: the drawers of religious images or little altarpieces. These strange objects that had private devotions or were carried by doctrinaire priests all along the American territory, could be considered a hint to understand how a new interiority emerged within us: an interiority where the relationships between space and time, life and death, good and evil, divine and earthly, lost their sense and were destructed. Even though, at the same time, these entities remain adored due to the beautiful baroque frames that confine them, isolated one from another.



Retablo tríptico de la Inmaculada. Escuela Quiteña. Siglo XVIII. Madera tallada, dorada y policromada, 85 cm de alto. Image from the Colonial Museum archive

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