
Editorial Commentary

Collaboration and Exchange across the Study of Colonial South American Visual Culture

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Yesterday I had the privilege of having coffee with a colleague, at a distance of course, masked between sips, on a cool, cloudy Santa Barbara morning. Day by day, COVID-19 vaccines are becoming more available in university communities across the United States, and the University of California, Santa Barbara (where the colleague and I both teach) is no exception. In the last week, professors at UCSB have started to get vaccinated. The assumption is that as more professors are vaccinated, research and teaching will begin to ramp up on the return toward pre-pandemic normal.

My colleague is an art historian from Southern California. I have lived and worked in the same area for more than twenty years. We are both nurturing young Jewish families. In the past, we each maintained a rigorous international travel schedule to support our academic work. Furthermore, we continue our scholarly work within ever-evolving constraints. Musing on the nature of international research in the midst of a global pandemic, she voiced concerns about being able to obtain archaeological data and samples, while I raised the possibility of hiring research assistants in South America to help propel my investigations along in the coming year. The University of California administration, however, seems keen to get professors back into their laboratories and research stations around the world. To support these efforts, COVID-19 vaccines will eventually be distributed to faculty and staff across the vast academic network.¹ At the same time, travel to Peru seems to both of us ethically questionable, as the country continues to suffer the brunt of this virulent coronavirus. With a healthcare system in a chaotic breakdown and thousands dying, Peru has been one of the nations hardest hit by the pandemic.²

1. University of California, Santa Barbara, Office of the Chancellor, news release, February 3, 2021, <https://chancellor.ucsb.edu/memos/2021-02-03-covid-19-vaccination-update>.

2. <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html>

COVID-19 has magnified long-standing debates about who has the right and responsibility to investigate, analyze, and write the history of the human experience around the world. Michel-Rolph Trouillot famously sought to raise scholarly awareness about how national stories take shape and in whose hands they are molded within the complexities of political realities.³ In all cases, according to Trouillot, history itself is constituted by power. He wrote: “Power does not enter the story once and for all, but at different times, and from different angles. It precedes the narrative proper, contributes to its creation and to its interpretation.”⁴ Trouillot’s assessment of how power relations shape historical narratives stems from a long history of decolonial critique. Aimé Césaire, among others, emphasized how colonialism constructed cultural hierarchies as “justification for the exploitation and domination of the rest of the world.”⁵ Scholarly investigation of the colonial art produced in viceregal South America is situated in a historical context that enables the study of power relations, social hierarchies, collective identifications, and individual expressions that constitute the coloniality of power.

The Colección Cisneros, founded by Patricia Phelps de Cisneros with the mission of supporting education and the visual arts of Latin America, initiated an online dialog in October 2019, asking several influential art historians and museum professionals to reflect on the theme “Re/Neo/De Colonial Art: What’s in a Name?”⁶ This online debate confronted the problematic insensitivities surrounding continued use of the term *colonial* to describe

3. Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995).

4. Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 28–29.

5. Robin D. G. Kelley, “A Poetics of Anticolonialism,” introduction to *Discourse on Colonialism*, by Aimé Césaire, trans. Joan Pinkham (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972), 9.

6. “Debates: Re/Neo/De Colonial Art: What’s in a Name?” Colección Cisneros, October 25, 2019, www.coleccioncisneros.org/editorial/debate/recode-colonial-art-what%E2%80%99s-name.

the arts of the early modern Spanish world. Thomas Cummins and Natalia Majluf cautioned against using the term *viceregal* as a replacement for the colonial qualifier in question. Cummins suggests that *viceregal* homogenizes visual culture production, silencing the historical conditions and actors that led to its creation; instead, he submits that “colonial . . . is more inclusive as it encompasses the oppressive conditions of indigenous peoples’ forced labor in Peru, of African slaves many of whom were artists working throughout America, and the racializing *castas* system used to create social hierarchies in America.”⁷ Majluf concurs with Cummins: “To the extent that it is understood as the expression of material forms of power, the term has helped historians move beyond the dualistic but also discursive visions of colonial society that simplistically oppose the figure of the Spanish colonizer to the indigenous colonized.”⁸ The term *colonial* activates scholarly attention, turning our scholarly awareness toward power structures and relations that previously silenced Indigenous, African, and mestizo voices.

Like the Colección Cisneros, the Carl & Marilyn Thoma Foundation is also dedicated to supporting education and the visual arts of Latin America, specifically the colonial art of South America. Patricia Phelps de Cisneros and Marilyn and Carl Thoma, among several other prominent North and South American collectors, such as Frederick and Jan Mayer for example, are working diligently with scholars, fellow collectors, curators, artists, students, and the public to facilitate the exchange of ideas through the study and exhibition of colonial visual culture.⁹ The Thoma Foundation has generously supported the work of Katherine Moore McAllen and Verónica Muñoz-Nájar Luque, published in the Dialogues sections of this and the next issue of *Latin American and Latinx Visual Culture*. This Dialogues presents new approaches to the investigation of the historiography of Spanish American colonial art in the Viceroyalties of New Spain and Peru. The reflective essays presented across this two-part Dialogues debate and discuss how colonial art was

informed by and participated in global networks of exchange. As this innovative work shows, colonial visual culture was far from constrained by sociopolitical dependency; rather, scholars asking the complicated questions can reveal how colonial visual culture was the result of dynamic creative processes that responded to local needs initiated by local artists, patrons, and audiences.

The global exchange of cultural forms and ideas in the visual and performative arts originated during the viceregal period. The continuous exchange of visual culture into the present day is a potent methodology for combating the impetus to build empires within empires. Looking at the visual culture of viceregal South America through the lens of global exchanges taking place over the last four hundred years is a powerful methodology for decolonizing the traditional field of art history. As Césaire himself recognized, “it is a good thing to place different civilizations in contact with each other; that it is an excellent thing to blend different worlds; that whatever its own particular genius may be, a civilization that withdraws into itself atrophies; that for civilizations, exchange is oxygen.”¹⁰ Introducing, making space for, and publishing a plurality of voices, both historical and contemporary, exponentially benefits the field while becoming a transdisciplinary model that can be fruitfully replicated across academia.

I came to study colonial Latin American art history by reading the work of Teresa Gisbert and José de Mesa. Their study of the “Andean Baroque,” in particular manifestations of the churrigueresque in baroque architecture, positioned colonial architecture in relation to Spanish architectural precedents. As Gisbert wrote in her landmark study of Andean iconography, the “Andean Baroque” was a new “mestizo style” that demonstrates the creative resilience of indigenous artists and patrons in the midst of colonial violence and domination.¹¹ Further, the collaborative work of the Bolivian architects cum art historians inspired me to look at the complexities of colonial South American visual culture as unique expressions of human aesthetic experimentation bound up in the contextual sociopolitical realities in which they were created. *Mestizaje*, hybridity, and syncretism—these approaches to identity formation and the complexity of the human experience in relation to it—are the

7. Thomas Cummins, “What Might ‘Colonial’ Do and Mean Now,” October 25, 2019, www.coleccioncisneros.org/editorial/debate/contribution/what-might-%E2%80%9Ccolonial%E2%80%9D-do-and-mean-now.

8. Natalia Majluf, “Terms of Power,” October 25, 2019, www.coleccioncisneros.org/editorial/debate/contribution/terms-power.

9. Frederick & Jan Mayer Center for Pre-Columbian & Spanish Colonial Art, Denver Art Museum, accessed April 5, 2021, <http://mayercenter.denverartmuseum.org/>.

10. Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, 33.

11. Teresa Gisbert, *Iconografía y mitos indígenas en el arte* (La Paz: Editorial Gisbert y Cia., 2008), 11.

foundation for the study of colonial visual culture. South American contexts provide fertile grounds for investigating these as well as issues related to the coloniality of power, dynamics of power, distribution of power, and the negotiation of power among individuals.

Gisbert and Mesa were not the first South Americans to study the continent's colonial visual culture. Most recently, Ananda Cohen-Aponte has written an important historiographical assessment of the state of the field that demonstrates how visual artists participating in the *indigenista* movement of the early twentieth century in Peru began to study local examples of colonial art. Her review of how colonial art came into Peru's national "cultural consciousness" demonstrates how indigenous popular artists and formally trained urban artists reinvigorated the study and observation of Peru's colonial art history in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century creation of *indigenista* aesthetics.¹² Gauvin Bailey, Carla Rahn Phillips, and Lisa Voigt have also offered their assessment of the state of the field of colonial Spanish American visual culture studies.¹³ As their study emphasizes, the field emerged in nationalist projects that sought to celebrate Indigenous and/or Hispanist colonial art. Art historical genealogies supported nationalist narratives across Latin America throughout the twentieth century.

Presently, many Latin American scholars and students are hamstrung by the limits of financial resources, although this problem is not new. Many scholars want to participate in researching and writing the art history of other areas of the world, but lack of funding prevents them from accessing libraries, archives, and collections abroad. Instead, they continue to focus their attention on local visual culture production, from ancient times into the present day. Independent scholars like Luis Eduardo Wuffarden in Lima have made countless contributions to the field yet lack institutional support at home or abroad. As Natalia Majluf has emphasized, scholars across Latin America have been forced to focus their research on local cultural production due to an absence of funding for graduate and scholarly research. While a curator and later director of the Museo de Arte de Lima (MALI), Majluf diligently built up the impressive

12. Ananda Cohen-Aponte. "Forging a Popular Art History, *Indigenismo* and the Art of Colonial Peru." *RES* 67/68 (2016/2017): 273–89, esp. 278.

13. Martin Elsky, Gauvin Bailey, Carla Rahn Phillips, and Lisa Voigt, "Spain and Spanish America in the Early Modern Atlantic World: Current Trends in Scholarship," *Renaissance Quarterly* 62, no. 1 (2009): 1–60.

collection of the museum's library, which is now a model in South America.¹⁴ The MALI library and archive contains original documents, manuscripts, specialty journals, exhibition catalogues, and books, as well as a specialized documentary collection on Peruvian art. The libraries and archives of Latin America are invaluable resources for students and scholars of visual culture; however, international digital, print, and archival materials still remain out of reach due to financial and geographic limits on accessibility. Furthermore, the constrictions placed upon travel and research during the pandemic have highlighted the unequal access not only to healthcare resources but to international travel and research by scholars from across Latin America, leaving open again the question, Who has the privilege to write the histories of Latin American colonial visual culture, and what histories will they choose to create?

LALVC, like the Colección Cisneros and the Thoma Foundation, is dedicated to providing a scholarly platform where North and South American voices in the field can exchange ideas to advance scholarship collectively. The interdisciplinary, transnational Dialogues organized by McAllen and Muñoz-Najár Luque is exemplary in demonstrating how North and South American scholarly collaboration can formulate new ways of framing the colonial period, as well as new methods for studying and interacting with colonial art. Their work demonstrates how scholars engaging with antiracism and decoloniality can reposition colonial visual culture beyond the constraints of the imperial legacy.¹⁵ By providing platforms for communication, museums, publications, and educational institutions open up endless possibilities for the field going forward. The erasure of pasts silenced by residual colonial power relations can be arrested, and new stories can surface and be told. Michael Schreffler's book on the architecture, urban planning, and visual culture of colonial Cusco, reviewed by Lisa Trever in this issue of *LALVC*, is a good example of how contemporary art historical scholarship can excavate colonial histories in just this way. Leslie Todd's contribution on *quiteño* sculpture is also a model of colonial art historical inquiry that gives us the opportunity to study, analyze, and critique the

14. See Mali Biblioteca y Archivo, <https://mali.pe/biblioteca/biblioteca-y-archivo/>.

15. Laura Loyola-Hernández, "Cusicanqui, Silvia Rivera," *Global Social Theory*, accessed April 5, 2021, <https://globalsocialtheory.org/thinkers/cusicanqui-silvia-rivera/>.

us/them, self/other paradigms that have dominated theoretical approaches to date. Todd states, "Focusing on this relationship between the visible and invisible, I extend beyond only the Indigenous artist to consider how Indigenous residents of Quito more broadly engaged with this celebrated local art form." Increasing focus on the ethnic complexities of visual culture production during the viceregal period contribute to the destabilization of long-standing hegemonic narratives of colonial domination.

As scholars move forward, away from the interpretive models of the past toward opening the conceptual possibilities of large-scale international exhibitions, research projects, and conservation initiatives, the study of colonial visual culture is moving toward a place of more critical assessment and deeper investigation. However, as these changes take shape across the field, it will remain imperative to recognize the authorization of the historian. Who gives us the right to record and remember histories? And under what conditions? Intellectual exchange across

North and South America is a critical form of interaction that must counter prevailing headwinds of privilege, separation, and exclusion. By engaging with new ways of framing the colonial visual cultural production of early modern Spanish America and new ways of studying and interacting with colonial art, scholars can again make the invisible visible, the silenced heard. Césaire's resistance to colonial domination is an ongoing project that takes many forms, and the study of colonial visual culture remains a powerful arena for that work to continue.

ABOUT THE ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Emily A. Engel is an independent scholar based in Southern California. Engel authored *Pictured Politics: Visualizing Colonial History in South American Portrait Collections* (University of Texas Press, 2020), edited *A Companion to Early Modern Lima* (Brill, 2019) and coedited *Manuscript Cultures of Colonial Mexico and Peru: New Questions and Approaches* (Getty Publications, 2015).