

The five “medallions of Turriana.”

Allegories of the past in the old National Library

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Man is engaged in a constant search for that which will complement his individuality. Thus he becomes involved in the process we call “knowledge,” expressing the results through symbols and allegories in an attempt to synthesize the given experience or particular idea, so it can acquire collective significance.

The difference between symbols and allegories may be expressed as follows. A symbol is the supreme synthesis of realities or metaphysical determinations; it is the expressive and precise conjunction or condensation of significant differences in a figure or icon, which expresses the perception of a reality which almost always remains invisible. An allegory, on the other hand, is made up of a set of metaphors which may even exclude the real sense of the object they represent. Thus, an allegory leads us to the most varied ideas; it is less synthetic than a symbol and therefore less precise.

The five anonymous paintings described in this article are

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part of the National University of Mexico’s holdings. Their thematic content has to do with various branches of science, while their style is representative of the mid-to late 17th-century fusion between motifs originating in the Greco-Roman Classical style and the Rococo taste for allegories. These paintings were previously held by the old Turriana Library, which was later integrated into the National Library when the latter was located in the Old Temple of St. Augustine.

The first sets of books which were to make up the Turriana Library’s collection were originally collected in the early 18th century by the precentor of Mexico City’s cathedral, Dr. Luis Antonio Torres Quintero. Upon his death in 1756 he bequeathed them to his nephews, the brothers Luis Antonio and Cayetano Antonio Torres Tuñón, who were also capitularies at the cathedral. The brothers formalized the library and gave it the name “Turriana.”

After the brothers’ death, the Turriana Library was acquired by the Metropolitan Library in

1788; it was closed to the public until 1804. In addition to its collections of books, the brothers provided it with the sum of twenty thousand pesos, which were used for constructing the building which would house the library, located to the west of the cathedral. They also donated a set of medals and pictures, among them the allegorical paintings to which we have referred.

In 1867, when the recently restored government of Benito Juárez seized ecclesiastical properties, the Turriana Library became part of the National Library’s found-

Photos by Arturo Piera



Navigation.



History.

ing collections. José María Benítez, the new library's director, was responsible for receiving the holdings and carried out an inventory which noted the arrival of 10,212 volumes, together with 88 shelves, 40 medallions inscribed with the contents of the shelves, as well as 17 allegorical paintings related to the various branches of the sciences.

The five paintings which concern us here belonged to this set of allegories. Their subjects allude to materials contained in the library's shelves, such as history, archeology, hydraulics, navigation and music. These oil-on-canvas works measure approximately 3 feet high by almost 4 feet wide and are in the form of a horizontal oval flattened on the bottom and placed within a circular composition.

Mexican art historian Francisco de la Maza mentions the paintings on navigation and history in the appendix devoted to illustrations in his work *La mitología*

clásica en el arte colonial de México

(Classical Mythology in Mexican Colonial Art). While he states that the theme they depict is based on mythological episodes from Virgil's *Aeneid*, a deeper analysis of the symbolism employed in each of the allegorical paintings reveals elements which differ from those of any episode in the *Aeneid*.

The painting entitled *Navigation* shows a number of interlinked scenes, typical of allegorical representations. The one which occupies the foreground shows several men building a boat near what seems to be a port; looking down from a parapet is a man with a helmet, armor and halberd characteristic of the Renaissance era. In the background we find the image of a man plying the seas aboard a ship, illuminated by the rising sun, symbolizing the search for new horizons. In the upper left-hand part of the painting one can barely make out a representation of the birth of Venus or Aphrodite, the symbol of fertility and vitality; arising from the shell on which she stands is a sea monster, from whose jaws flows the water of the sea. We may consider the figures of the shell and the goddess as allusions to the fecundity of water and the renewal of life that comes through voyages, change and the discovery of new worlds.

The foreground of *History* depicts Cronos or "Father Time" as a naked old man, with wings and a scythe. This painting is an allegory for the return to Classicism: Father Time is walking towards a pavilion which rests on columns and capitals atop a huge, majestically upright rock, a symbol of firmness and plenitude. A splendid sun rises behind the pavilion, illuminating the whole scene, which is filled with stones of various dimensions as well as palm trees. The palms symbolize victorious renewal, the glorious entrance of Jesus Christ to Jerusalem as related in the Evangelists. This is also the significance of the banner placed behind Cronos, a totemic insignia par excellence.

The same representation of Cronos or Father Time appears in the painting entitled *Archeology*. The winged old man with a scythe is depicted as part of an allegory in which a child shows him a medalion of the bust of Julius Caesar,



Archeology.



Music.

while three men carry out excavations in the ground facing them and one unearths a sculpture of Pallas Athena. The image seems to refer, in general terms, to the archeological discoveries made in 1720 near Naples, Italy, when the lost city of Heraklea or Herculano (derived from Herakles or Hercules) was unearthed, as well as the 1748 discovery of Pompeii. Both cities had been covered with lava from the eruption of Mount Vesuvius. These discoveries not only gave rise to modern archeology; in the field of art they also led to the gradual abandonment of the Rococo style (derived from the Baroque), with a renewed taste for the patterns of Greek and Romantic Classicism. In the upper right of this painting we also see a sculpture of Hercules, covered with the legendary skin of the lion of Nemea and wielding a club in order to kill a kind of python. The men in the background on the left are contemplating some

of the mural frescos found in the excavations; images from these murals were evoked in the works of many painters who cultivated the Neo-Classical style.

Music shows three musicians in Oriental garb, each holding a different stringed instrument (a cello, violin and bass). Several cherubim appear with them, while on the opposite (left) side of the painting we find the representation of a composer (probably Palestina) in Western dress; a muse with a lute is standing by his side. Two magnificent, Solomonian columns flank the scene, while a number of Classical columns may be observed in the background. These elements bear witness to the integration, in all of these allegorical paintings, of the Baroque style—which had begun to lose its predominance—with the new, Neo-Classical style, which by the last third of the 18th century had come into its own and would then lead to the Academicism characteristic of the first half of the 19th century.

Lastly, in *Hydraulics or Physics* we see, in the foreground, the figure of a personage in Arab dress, directing the activity of several men in Western clothing. To the left, one of these men is pressing down on the end of a lever which lifts the floodgates controlling water for

irrigation. The image seems to allude to the era when Spain had been invaded by the Arabs, who brought such technological innovations as irrigation systems, which allowed for an adequate distribution of water in agricultural regions, through the construction of canals and aqueducts based on the application of the principles of hydraulics or the art of using natural waters.

With regard to the allegories on navigation, archeology, history and hydraulics, it is important to note that their restoration has recently been completed, thanks to which we may now fully enjoy the original qualities of these works, worthy representatives of the emblematic and allegorical painting of New Spain.¹

¹ New Spain was the Colonial name for Mexico. (Translator's note.)



Hydraulics or Physics.