

Revelations

The Arts in Latin America 1492-1820

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Anonymous, Child Christ with imperial Inca crown, dressed as a Catholic priest, eighteenth century, Peru (oil on canvas). Private collection.

Motivated among other things by interesting research and a series of increasingly well-documented exhibits about extant Latin American art from the colonial period, Joseph Rishel, curator of the Philadelphia Art Museum's European pre-twentieth-century art collection, decided to contribute to the knowledge and appreciation of the complexity of the artistic legacy of Spanish viceregal America and Brazil, dominated by Portugal. He gathered together a select committee of researchers, curators and specialists and coordinated their efforts to structure the bases, references and collections that inform the exhibit *Revelations: the Arts in Latin America, 1492-1820*.

Committed to giving this artistic legacy the place it deserves in the Western tradition given the transformations it effected in it, with the support of a Getty Foundation grant, his team met as often as necessary to delimit its field of research and the strategy for the undertaking. They also traveled to several countries, visiting museums, private archives and collections and public and religious institutions to request the loan of pieces whose quality made them exceptional testimony of the period. In addition, these efforts unearthed some works that were severely damaged and other pieces that would be documented and exhibited for the first time. The experience also demonstrated the need to establish practical mechanisms to simplify the paperwork involved in loans from collections, at the same time serving to contribute to their protection and dissemination. The restoration of some cultural goods included in the collection is a way of contributing to the preservation of this irreplaceable legacy. We should underline the generosity of sponsors, museums and collectors whose loans have been vital for organizing this exhibition.

Three museums committed to promoting inter-institutional collaboration to open up new horizons to greater knowledge of our cultural diversity joined hands to organize this complex project: the Philadelphia Art Museum, the Old College of San Ildefonso and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Paintings, sculp-



Anonymous, *Saint Elesbón*, second half of the eighteenth century, Recife (multicolored wood). 5ª Superintendencia Regional of IPHAN, Pernambuco, Brazil.

tures, textiles, worked gold, furniture and ceramics, among other items, reveal the characteristics of the most diverse, complex societies, as well as the similarities and differences in religious expressions, languages, traditions and artistic expressions shared by the peoples of Latin America.

This exhibition is the first in Mexico to cover so many countries in colonial Latin America over a period of almost three centuries. Although not all the countries responded with the same generosity, the diversity of the artistic genres included in the collection, the selection of artists, works and themes, offer a wonderful opportunity to be amazed at the many revelations they spark. The artistic production created by and for colonial society in the different regions of Latin America is displayed museographically in a way that, without aspiring to completely exhaust the theme, allows both amateurs and scholars to admire an un-

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Photos courtesy of the Old College of San Ildefonso, taken by César Flores.

precedented array of works: important oeuvres brought together for the first time, loaned by 59 art museums, 37 Catholic archdioceses, religious orders and churches and at least 20 private collectors. The exhibition includes more than 243 works from Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador, Colombia, Venezuela, Guatemala, Mexico, the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico. In truth, this is an exceptional opportunity to examine close up originals that very often cannot even be seen in their countries of origin. And that does not take into account the fact that visiting all the loaning institutions would cost a fortune.

The exhibition, very successfully inaugurated last September at the Philadelphia Art Museum, was an excellent introduction to the diversity of artistic and cultural expressions forged by Latin American society.

For Latin American viewers, the exhibit was strengthened using descriptions and chronologies that prompt-

ed other observations or reviews revealing the ties between the Americas and the rest of the world. The Old College of San Ildefonso benefited from the advisory services of Dr. Clara Bargellini of the UNAM Institute for Aesthetic Research, who was part of the scientific committee collaborating with Joseph Rishel from the project's onset. Dr. Bargellini fine-tuned the documentation, selection and distribution of the collections sent from Philadelphia and 40 more pieces loaned to San Ildefonso to enrich the discourse. Simultaneously, all the museum's departments designed strategies and activities to optimize the organiza-

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Juan Patricio Morlete Ruiz, *Our Lady of Guadalupe*, mid-eighteenth century, Mexico (oil on canvas). Private collection.



Diego Quispe Curo, *Christ on a Column*, 1667, Potosí (multicolored cedar).
Provincia Misionera San Antonio in Bolivia, Recoleta Convent Museum, Sucre, Bolivia.

The revelations go from the singularity of an object, its iconography, style and technique, to the circumstances that governed social, political and economic interaction.

tion, promotion and security in the different services offered to visitors, in addition to taking charge of the conservation and protection of the collections.

In contrast with the Philadelphia Art Museum, a building in the neoclassical style, the Old College of San Ildefonso, a wonderful example of New Spain architecture, was added to the collection it held as an ideal showplace for the thematic interpretation of the museographical script.

The collection was distributed chronologically, by theme and to balance the combination of artistic genres. The aim was to weave a discourse that would allow for multiple approximations to the analysis or appreciation of the collection. The incorporation of new works that, for different reasons, could not be displayed in Philadelphia, together with the design of the furniture, graphics and lighting, gave the exhibit in San Ildefonso an expressive intensity that makes it even more eloquent. Pieces of the college's permanent collection, like the large-scale oils from the sacristy and the set of chairs from the San Agustín Convent kept in the El Generalito Room, were naturally incorporated into the display.

The exhibition was structured around five themes distributed in 12 rooms, each in a different color that, combined with the light, brought out the formal qualities of every piece: "The Meeting

of Materials and Processes," "Debated, Reinterpreted and Transformed Places," "Artistic Traditions of the Americas," "Devotions for Life and Death" and "Societies of Diverse and Multicolored Individuals." In a progression, the visitor discovered, compared, recognized and detected similarities and contrasts between works of different origins. The revelations go from the singularity of an object, its iconography, the style and technique, the creator and his/her context, to the exchanges and circumstances that governed social, political and economic interaction. Among the different arts and trades included in the collection are outstanding artists from all the regions, many still unknown to most of our populations, whose work and influence transcended local borders. These include Bernardo Bitti, from Cuzco, Peru; Melchor Pérez Holguín from Potosí, Bolivia; Gregorio Vásquez de Arce

y Ceballos, from Bogotá; Luis Juárez, Alonso López de Herrera, Juan Correa and Cristóbal de Villalpando, from Mexico; Antonio Francisco Lisboa (Aleijadinho), from Brazil; Bernardo de Legarda and Manuel Chili Caspicara, from Quito; and José Campeche, from San Juan de Puerto Rico, among others. There are also outstanding works by anonymous artists, whose craftsmanship can be seen in the impressive originality and the quality of furniture, ceramics, feather art, textiles, gold working and sculpture.

The museum's main objectives in mounting this exhibit were to achieve a museography that gives the visitor a pleasurable aesthetic experience; by documenting these collections, to emphasize the transcendence of European expansion that connects the Americas with the other continents, as well as the social, economic and political transformations that the mestizo culture fed by migrations spurred; and the exchanges during the centuries of consolidation of viceregal societies and their impact in the world. In a globalized world in which migration is increasing despite measures to stop it, it is a good idea to foster this kind of review to tear down prejudices and make balanced judgments both about the past and the present, favoring exchanges that further progress and peaceful coexistence among the cultures of the world. An exhibition like this one lends itself to debate about many issues and situations linked to Latin American cultural unity.

The show is supplemented by essays by 55 outstanding specialists, as well as broad documentation and illustrations that shed new light on the collection. All of this has been gathered in a splendid catalogue/book that

will most certainly become a reference work. More than concentrating on the formal qualities, the style and the iconography of some of the master works on display in all the rooms and analyzed even more in the catalogue, soon to be published in Spanish by the Fondo de Cultura Económica, I would like to emphasize the underlying unity of the different themes that make up the exposition.

The first room is an introduction, situating the visitor in the context of a period of encounters and migrations, illustrated by a map of the viceroyalties and their links to the rest of the world. In addition, a few works are displayed as examples of artistic genres that exist-



Miguel Cabrera, *From a Mestizo and an Indian Is Born a Coyote*, 1763, Mexico (oil on canvas). Elisabeth Waldo-Dentzel Collection, Northridge Studios.

ed prior to the conquest and which the Europeans admired for their originality and quality. The same techniques were later used and massively adapted to the Christian iconography: feather art, sculpture in corn stalk paste, wood or stone, and painting were all pillars of and media in which reminiscences of Mesoamerican and Andean cultures can be glimpsed. They shine through in the furniture decorated with inlays, the ceramics, the work with mother-of-pearl incrustations and screens, with both Asian and Western influences. Clearly new techniques have been introduced to make them, revealing the innovative skill of the artists and craftsmen in the Americas in interpreting only recently assimilated codes. To this should be added the cultural influences from African slaves and groups of Asians who joined these societies. This many underlying meanings make each work an unending source of knowledge.

In an atmosphere dramatized by the red-painted walls, evoking the intensity of these encounters, singular works illustrate a network

of exchanges of materials, techniques, trade routes traveled by men and women, traditions, beliefs, dreams and aspirations. The printing press and navigation favored a previously unimaginable spread of Western culture and the Christian religion. All the works evidence the skill and meticulousness with which they were fashioned. Recognizing ourselves in this approach to the creative diversity of the new world awakens a re-creation of the viewer through his/her imagination and a re-creation of how each work was made.

The next theme deals with the appropriation of space, referring to the places reinterpreted and transformed following the guidelines established by the Spanish crown for the colonization of the new lands and the exploitation of their riches. The spiritual conquest, the missionary endeavors, the urbanization of the new settlements with different hierarchical structures forged customs that made up a mestizo society that, defending its own values, began to reconstruct its historic memory after a century of living together.

The room that holds these works is painted in the blue of the scenery, highlighting different aspects of its topography in a sort of chronicle that reviews the event, the miracle, the memory and territorial demarcations. A detailed chronicle can be discerned from the paintings, screens, maps and furniture; the artists' eyes do not miss the smallest detail. The exploitation of the wealth of the new settlements was decisive for the distribution of lands to the Spaniards, local strongmen-caciques and indigenous communities.

The artistic traditions of the Americas reflect the enormous number of images and objects that viceregal societies demanded to adorn their churches, palaces and residences. The services of teachers and craftsmen were required to decorate their



Anonymous, Desk, end of the eighteenth or beginning of the nineteenth centuries, Quito (wood with hardwood inlays; base added in restoration). Franz Mayer Museum, Mexico City.

homes and to make gifts and donations. The markets and fairs supplied by the Nao ships, galleons and caravels fostered intense intercontinental trade. In these rooms, the work and influence of religious orders and brotherhoods as the main patrons of art shines through. Master craftsmen from Spain, Italy, Flanders and Portugal organized guilds, respecting to the letter the ordinances established for their foundation, facilitating the transmission of trade secrets to several generations and encouraging the intervention of indigenous, mulattos, Asians and Creoles in artistic production. Religion, classical literature and the stylistic trends of the moment were sources of inspiration for the creators, attentive to the most convincing proposals of their time. From the gray walls hang paintings projecting their own luminosity and, in the middle of the rooms are sculptures, pieces of furniture and extraordinary examples of silver work in which the viewer can discern different sensibilities, materials, techniques and uses. The talent of the masters of the baroque period in the Americas reveals qualities whose popularity transcended the hemisphere.

Societies manifest their spirituality in their devotional ceremonies for life and death; they add to the Christian iconography new figures and attributes linked to the appearances, miracles and the syncretism derived from the adaptation of ancient beliefs and concessions to the Christian catechism. The interpretation of Biblical passages, of the life of Christ, of the Virgin and the Saints, or the ornamentation of churches, of worship, the vestments, the instruments and the liturgy itself are all aspects that reflect particular regionalisms and forms of worship. The same can be seen in the use of techniques like lacquers or paste varnish that the American indigenous used. The presence of communities of African origin can be perceived in Brazil and Guatemala, with saints like Saint Elesbán and Saint Ifigenia, as well as Saint Martín de Porres in Peru. Our Lady of Guadalupe and the indigenous Juan Diego are linked to Mexico's pre-Hispanic past, and Saint Rosa de Lima, the first Native American to be canonized, was born in Peru. We can also point to the Virgins of Cocharcas and of Copacabana, or Guatemala's Virgin of Colocha or Ecuador's Virgin of Quito. Talented goldsmiths and cabinet-makers, carvers, painters and sculptors contributed



Attributed to Diego de Atienza, *Monstrance*, 1649, Lima (poured, chiseled and engraved gold-plated silver with enamel). Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Friedsam Collection, property of Michael Friedsam.

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with works of impeccable manufacture to the success of society's religious conversion. Under the solemn nave of the chapel of the Old College of San Ildefonso, magnificent carvings and paintings brilliantly reflect the splendor of the baroque and its versions of religious faith. In this space, monumental works dialogue, illustrating through their variations, beliefs and aspirations the complexity of the religious manifestations expressed through artistic creation. As though they had been conceived for the place, the dais



Partial view of the room "Art Traditions of the Americas," the exhibit's third theme.

and crucifix of Olinda shine before the La Dolorosa altarpiece from the Jesuit Santa Lucía hacienda.

The last section of the visit illustrates some of the changes that came about with the arrival of the Bourbons to the throne and the impact of the ideas of the Enlightenment, which imposed a greater secularity on customs and thinking. Creole society portrayed its composition and defined its hierarchies, and its elites manifested their refinement and taste for domestic furnishings. The caste painting genre emerged in New Spain, illustrating a multi-ethnic society. These are valuable pictorial testimonies projecting tastes and customs, fashions and food, in the end, mixtures that captivated the curiosity of the European and Latin American enlightened alike. The passion for commemorating dates important for families to remember and celebrate, the dedication to spiritual education and the intellectual training of family members motivated an increase in portraits of civic officials, crowned nuns, the deceased, babies and families.

In all the viceroyalties, a mestizo society, conscious of its own values, began to decrease its production of religious art and direct its gaze toward the rococo and neoclassical styles promoted by the canons of the academy. Our visit to the exhibition ends in this blue room, where the portrait of the liberator Simón Bolívar announces the beginnings of the independence movements that would mark the close and transcendence of this immensely rich period.

Revelations: The Arts in Latin America, 1492-1820 included activities like creative workshops, concerts, lectures and a seminar incorporating some of the authors published in the catalogue. Like a banquet of unprecedented stimuli, this exhibition began the celebration of the first 15 years of the museum which, since 1992, has made enormous efforts to find projects whose excellence and quality transcend and contribute to strengthening the cultural development of our societies. **MM**