A Currency of Culture:
Considering the Value of Silver in Colonial Potosí

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In the austere southern highlands of Bolivia, there is a city known as the Villa Imperial that sustained a vast Empire. Potosí, perched 13,000 feet over sea level, rivaled the great capitals of Europe in population, wealth and extravagance (figure 1). It was the most important city in the southern Andes, known also as “Alto Peru”, during the colonial period. Potosí credits its former glory to the “rich mountain” or Cerro Rico, the given name of the massive red-colored mountain that overlooks the city. Massive quantities of silver ore mined from the Cerro Rico created the largest industry on the South American continent during the colonial period. As a consequence of this mining boom, it was recognized as one of the most important cities in the Viceroyalty of Peru. Potosí enjoyed a rapid ascent to glory from its founding in 1545 until the mid-17th century, when silver production began to steadily decrease. While Potosí’s elite managed to hold on to their assets into the late colonial period, the city never succeeded in recreating the prominence it experienced from 1545-1650. Today, the city exists as a shell of its former self; the Cerro Rico continues to be exploited by local miners for a miniscule yield, and the indicators of the city’s former success are often overshadowed by the crippling poverty faced by the city’s residents.

How did Potosí, which once held a pivotal role in securing the stability of the Viceroyalty of Peru, fall so far from grace? The narrative of a formerly grand metropolis falling into ruin is an age-old story that transcends time and space; Potosí is hardly the first city to experience such a dramatic downfall. What makes Potosí particularly interesting is the relatively little attention it has received from the academic community. The available literature concerning Potosí’s history is scant when considering its immense importance in economically sustaining the Viceroyalty of Peru in the early colonial period (ca. 1550-1650). There are several facets of Potosí’s history that

1 Hanke, The Imperial City, 30.
merit additional attention; one such facet is how silver shaped Potosí’s economic and artistic development, and how this influenced the surrounding region that depended on the Villa Imperial for their livelihood.

As the silver industry grew exponentially, the value of this precious metal—as an element of cosmological or social significance, as a form of currency, and as a luxury art material—shifted. In the Pre-Columbian Andes, silver had a profound cosmological meaning that determined its use in certain kinds of objects. The concept of silver as a form of currency did not figure into its value in this context, but this changed dramatically after the Spanish invasion and settlement of the Andean region. The Spanish colonial authorities implemented European modes of commerce throughout the Viceroyalty, which preferred the use of currency to conduct exchanges. As a raw material mined and refined for industry, silver’s worth can be measured from historical registers of its production. As a material used to create luxury goods, silver has a monetary worth and a deeper social meaning as a status marker.

Potosí’s silver industry profoundly shaped the history of South America. By rapidly developing the Andean region and allowing for the creation of a rich artistic tradition founded in silver production, the Villa Imperial is responsible for shaping the regional identity of the southern Andes. Using the limited bibliographic material available, I will posit how Pre-Columbian Andean societies valued silver, and how this value shifted dramatically with the implementation of European modes of exchange and material culture. I will address how the shift in silver’s value from a cosmological force to a form of currency was manifested through the elaboration of different kinds of silver objects, which held distinct values dependent upon their purpose. This study aims to dispel the notion that material culture elaborated in silver is not equal in value to the paintings and sculptures of the colonial Andean guilds considered to be “fine arts”. Particular attention will be granted to objects in silver that embody a uniquely Andean artistic
tradition, born out of the combination of indigenous and European genres of expression. Silver’s paramount importance to the Pre-Columbian and colonial history of Alto Perú gives it a more profound value than that of a work of art elaborated in a European format, such as painting and sculpture. The temporal frame for this essay will range from the Pre-Columbian period until the end of the 18th century. The frame must be wide in order to accommodate the limited scholarship on metallurgic traditions in the Pre-Columbian southern Andes, as well as the lack of provenance for many of the silver objects examined in this work. The geographic frame for this project will be the southwestern region of Bolivia where Potosí is located.

This paper will first present an approach for conceptualizing the value of objects and practices in a general sense. Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of distinction will serve as the model for determining the value of silver, particularly when referring to material culture made of this precious metal. This methodology will then be applied to the Pre-Columbian and colonial history of silver production and artistry in Potosí and its surrounding region. A concise overview of the Pre-Columbian and colonial history of Potosí relevant to silver production will be used to apply the theory of determining value. A review of relatable literature will be provided throughout this section in order to gauge the amount and kind of scholarship available concerning Potosí’s Pre-Columbian and colonial history. Lastly, three examples of objects made of silver will be presented as examples of how the shift in silver’s value developed a uniquely Andean mode of expression that combined indigenous and European indicators of value. These objects are defined as “secular”, “functional”, and “utilitarian” objects in this paper. The term “secular” is used to characterize these objects as non-ecclesiastical, therefore falling outside of the more commonly studied silver objects made for the Church. The terms “functional/utilitarian” denote these objects’ unique position as everyday items crafted out of a luxury material, which deems them either meant for special occasions or meant for decorative purposes only. The question of the
indigenous influence on these particular objects also comes into play. These examples contribute
to the assessment of silver’s value by incorporating several factors through which one can
measure their value. This paper will serve as a preliminary exploration of the history of
transcultural silver objects in colonial Alto Perú. The term “transcultural” refers to the concept of
transculturation, which in its most general sense explains the converging of cultures.²

**Measuring the Value of Silver Through Distinction**

In terms of a theoretical model, this project will focus on mapping a changing value of silver as an industrial product, a luxury material for artistic production, and a socially and spiritually charged element. French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s theory concerning how societies value art will serve as the theoretical framework for defining artistic value in this paper. In his work *Distinction: a Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, Bourdieu offers insight into how western societies discern the value of certain objects and practices. Bourdieu claims that the social world functions simultaneously as an arena for power relations, and a symbolic system where minute distinctions of taste become the basis for social judgment. These ever-changing tastes determine the social value of things. As a result, things such as art objects are markers of taste, and their value increases as fewer people are able to appropriate them. Bourdieu notes that “to appropriate a work of art is to assert oneself as the exclusive possessor of the object and of the authentic taste for that object, which is thereby converted into the reified negation of all those who are unworthy of possessing it”.³

This theory of assessing value to art may be applied to the measurement of silver’s worth as it is presented in this paper. The reason why silver was so valuable to Pre-Columbian cultures,

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³ Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 280.
as the evidence presented in the subsequent section suggests, is that it was not available to the general population. The religious mandate of the Inka, for example, gave the Inka ruler exclusive rights to all of the silver in the empire. Silver was not used as an official form of currency in the Pre-Columbian period; this also made its value increase as it lessened the ability to appropriate the material even in a basic form. However, it should be noted that Bourdieu’s theory of distinction is based on how western societies determine the value of objects, and is not necessarily applicable to the framework of Pre-Columbian societies. The fact that this theory is applicable in the context of silver may refer to the intrinsically human attraction to precious metals for their brilliant qualities. The Inkas’ approach to valuing silver may also be easily applied because of the way that western scholarship has framed Inka society.

The role of silver in colonial Potosí may also be applied to Bourdieu’s theory. The variety of silver objects created in the colonial period, along with the implementation of silver as currency makes the measurement of silver’s value more complex in this context. Because some colonial silver objects from Alto Perú resemble utilitarian objects that could possibly used on a daily basis, they adopt a lesser value than silver objects featured as untouchable decorative elements in churches. However, the fact that these objects are crafted of silver demotes them as luxury items possibly unsuitable for everyday use, thus increasing their monetary, aesthetic, and social value. Their transcultural nature further adds to their value since they take on meaning from both an indigenous and a European context.

The Value of Silver in the Pre-Columbian Andes

Scholarship on Potosí’s Pre-Columbian history is very limited. Metallurgic traditions of Pre-Columbian cultures of the Andes treat this region as a collective, with major focus falling on the Inka capital of Cusco and the Lake Titicaca region. There is not yet a monograph dedicated to
the study Pre-Columbian metallurgy in the southern Andean highlands. However, a recent article by Mark Abbott and Alexander Wolfe offers a preliminary study of how Cerro Rico ores may have been actively smelted at a large scale in the Late Intermediate Period, possibly providing evidence for a major pre-Inka silver mining operation. Until the development of a lengthy regional study on the silver production and artisanship of the southern Andes, studies of Pre-Columbian Andean metallurgy on a larger scale may be used to deduce how southern Andean communities conceptualized silver.

Scholarship on Pre-Columbian metallurgy on a broader scale is more evolved than regional study in the southern Andes. Through their work on assessing metallurgic traditions from Pre-Columbian cultures across the entire Central/South American continent, Heather Lechtman Mary Helms, and Michael Moseley provide a framework for conceptualizing the value of silver during the Pre-Columbian period. In her work “The Significance of Metals in Pre-Columbian Andean Culture”, Lechtman, a materials scientist and archaeologist, notes that although Pre-Columbian Andean cultures boasted a highly sophisticated metallurgy tradition, little interest has been paid to Andean metallurgy because historians cannot speak to a “bronze age” or “iron age” that distinguishes metallurgic traditions in Eurasia. Lechtman also explains how metals fit within the value system implemented by the Inka state in the 14th through 16th centuries, stating, “In the Andes, metals performed in the realm of the symbolic, in both the secular and the religious spheres of life. They carried and displayed the content or message of status, wealth and political power and reinforced the affective power of religious cult objects”. Lechtman’s study of the cosmological value of metals in the Pre-Columbian Andes provides this work with a palpable understanding of how Pre-Columbian cultures, most notably the Inka, understood the metals they used to create high-status objects. The Inka are the primary model for

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assessing the value of metals in a Pre-Columbian context because of their presence in the Alto Perú region immediately preceding the arrival of the Spanish to the Andes.

Archaeologist Mary Helms’s work on the significance of Pre-Columbian metallurgy concerns the style of the objects produced by Pre-Columbian cultures across Latin America. Her work “Precious Metals and Politics: Style and Ideology in the Intermediate Area and Peru” led to the discovery of a revealing text by archaeologist Michael Moseley detailing the way that Inka nobility perceived of precious metals. This excerpt by Moseley rounds out the sentiments echoed by Lechtman in the previous paragraph. In his work Peru’s Golden Treasures he states,

A hierarchy of goods was employed by the state to deal with a hierarchy of reciprocal obligations…there was a strict order as to who received what, with silver and gold going to individuals of the highest ranks. Reciprocity and the distribution of valued items by rank essentially placed all arts and skilled crafts in direct service of the body politic. Artisans were government-supported…and artistic production was geared to state ends. As a result, aesthetic canons, design motifs, and technological considerations were largely dictated by the political and religious bodies supporting the artisans, commissioning their work, and controlling its distribution. This situation resulted in ‘corporate styles’, which is to say styles associated with particular states and their political and religious institutions.”

Moseley outlines here the terms for defining the importance of metals to the Inka system of reciprocity. This concept may be applied to the way that elites in colonial Perú perceived of items made in silver, and provides a way of thinking about the kinds of objects elaborated in precious metals during the Pre-Columbian period. Based on Moseley’s observations, the organization of artistic production under the Inka controlled the kinds of objects produced, and probably left little freedom of expression to create objects that did not serve a specific purpose linked to the Inka nobility. According to Bourdieu’s theory of distinction, the social value of silver in this context is extremely high. The exclusivity of the material based on its cosmological significance serves as an interesting contrast to the narratives from colonial Potosí that told of silver’s abundance.
The Potosí Silver Boom: History and Effects

By 1610, Potosí had become the largest city in Latin America, boasting a total of 160,000 residents. The Villa Imperial had succeeded in attracting a larger population than most European cities at the time. The production and trade of silver in the Andes operated at a scale larger than any other economic enterprise in the region. Historian Peter Bakewell notes, “The only other type of production that even approached industrial status was textile manufacture industry, and that was only in New Spain”. While mine owners kept meticulous records of their productivity, the tradition of independent artisanal mining that took place on the days that the mines were officially closed makes it impossible to determine exactly how much silver the Cerro Rico mines produced since 1545. The silver output for all Spanish settlements in the Americas from the mid-16th century until 1600 or 1610 was approximately 375 to 400 million pesos, or 10.6 to 1.3 million kilos. The time frame for this estimate is the same as the peak of Potosí’s silver production; this is evidenced by charting the annual registered silver production in the Potosí district, which indicates that Potosí reached the peak of its silver production between 1575 and 1615. Potosí is commonly referred to as the most productive silver mine in the Americas, and so it may be suggested that the Cerro Rico was responsible for most of this output. It is important to reference Potosí’s economic success due to the silver industry because of how it affected the perception of silver to the colonial authorities, which controlled its mining, refining and distribution to a certain degree.

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5 Bakewell, Silver and Entrepreneurship, 191. New Spain was the colonial-era term for Spain’s holdings in what is now Mexico.
6 Holler and Bakewell, A History of Latin America, 355.
7 Hanke, The Imperial City, 15.
8 Bakewell, Silver Entrepreneurship, p. 188 n. 2.
9 Bakewell, Miners of the Red Mountain, 28-29.
It should be mentioned that while silver production became the foremost (and only) true industry in the Viceroyalty of Peru, the precious metal of greatest interest to the Spanish was initially gold. However, gold output in the Americas did not grow as quickly as that of silver, and the value of gold was far less than that of silver. Historian Jacqueline Holler along, with Peter Bakewell, note that

The total amount of gold gathered by the Spanish in New Granada, New Spain and Peru from 1521 to 1610 has been estimated at the equivalent of 48.46 million silver pesos. That is only 12% of the proposed 400 million peso silver production of Spanish America to 1610. It was probably some point in the 1540’s, when little gold was left to loot, that the value of silver mined passed that of gold acquired. The lure of gold may first have drawn Spain and Spaniards to America; but it was the reality of silver that kept them there.\(^1\)

Here, silver is established as a material more valuable than gold, established by its economic force rather than the demand for this precious metal. This notion is in direct opposition to Bourdieu’s supposition that something gains value by becoming less accessible to a general population and going in and out of fashion. Silver has seemingly never gone out of style as a mode of currency and as a material for creating luxury goods; in this sense, Bourdieu’s model does not work in this context; it is much better applied to Pre-Columbian modes of valuing silver.

There are a few chronicles dating from the colonial period that include descriptions of Potosí. These are Luis Capoche’s *Relación general del asiento y Villa Imperial de Potosí* (1585), Fray Diego de Ocaña’s *Viaje por el Nuevo Mundo* (1605), and Bartolomé Arzáns Orsúa y Vela’s *Relatos de la Villa Imperial de Potosí* [1736]. Hanke mentions a few other chronicles of Potosí from the colonial period that have been lost.\(^1\) Luis Capoche was an indigenous/mestizo mine

\(^1\) Holler and Bakewell, *A History of Latin America*, 231.
owner who wrote an account on the silver industry in Potosí during the height of the Cerro Rico’s productivity. His chronicle is the earliest known account of Potosí and is doubly unique for providing an indigenous account of silver production. Diego de Ocaña’s chronicle has a sizeable account of his experiences in the Villa Imperial. He focuses specific attention on the festivals of colonial Potosí, but his account of the city’s grandeur provide a sense of how rich it once was.

Bartolomé Arzáns Orsúa y Vela was a criollo from Potosí, born in the Americas of Spanish parents; Peter Bakewell describes him as “Potosí’s prime chronicler”. While his personal life remains relatively mysterious, Arzáns Osrúa y Vela “recounts with abundant detail the pageant of that mining center where wealth and poverty, avarice and generosity, religiosity and bitter hatreds, cruelty, and intrigue all flourished and usually in extreme manifestations”.

These chronicles are essential for gaining an understanding of how those living in the colonial period perceived the city of Potosí. However, these sources perpetuate the “myth” of Potosí as a larger-than-life metropolis where silver was so prevalent that it was disposable. One well-cited example tells of how during the passage of the Blessed Sacrament during the Corpus Christi celebration, the streets of Potosí were supposedly paved with silver ingots loaned by the city's wealthiest citizens. This blatant display of affluence marked silver as both an indicator of Potosí’s prosperity, but also portrayed silver as a material that was so abundant that it could be used to pave roads. The grandeur of Potosí is well documented, but regarding the city in such an elevated manner does not assist in arriving at the crux of silver’s role in creating a colonial

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11 These include the first history of Potosí, according to Hanke, that was alleged to have been composed by a Portuguese names Antonio de Acosta. It was printed in Lisbon in 1672, and translated into Spanish by one Juan Pasquier for publication in Sevilla—but this manuscript has been lost since then. The other chronicle mentioned by Hanke is the Historia de la Villa Imperial de Potosí, descubrimiento y grandez de su cerro rico, by 17th century scholar and royal official Antonio de León Pínele. Hanke, The Imperial City, 12-13.
12 Bakewell, Silver and Entrepreneurship, 23.
14 Esteras Martín, Acculturation and Innovation, 65.
Andean society. In order to reach conclusions about silver’s unique role in shaping South America as it exists today, one must gain a sense of its worth combined value systems from indigenous and European cultures while taking note of certain biases.

With the exception of Luis Capoche’s 1585 chronicle on Potosí’s mining culture, Spanish or criollo chroniclers were responsible for the available historical narratives on Potosí. The archival material concerning Potosí reflects a society dominated by Spanish modes of governance. For example, in Peter Bakewell’s work *Silver and Entrepreneurship in Seventeenth-Century Potosí*, the author employs wills, dowry records, contracts, lawsuit proceedings, and official correspondence of colonial administrators to piece together a historical biography of one of Potosí’s most successful businessmen. Because the frames of reference for this essay come from Spanish, criollo or secondary sources, the indigenous voice that may offer a stronger sense of the shift from Pre-Columbian notions of valuing silver to the industrialization of the precious metal in the colonial period.

There is a limited scope of contemporary scholarship available on Potosí’s colonial history in spite of the city’s paramount importance during that period. However, a few contemporary scholars have produced quality accounts of the Villa Imperial in the colonial period. The first major work by a 20th century historian on Potosí is Lewis Hanke’s 1956 work *The Imperial City of Potosí: An Unwritten Chapter in the History of Spanish America*. The title of this book is a testament to the city’s neglected status compared to its fellow colonial urban centers. Hanke’s monograph provides a complete historiography of Potosí, providing information on lost chronicles of Potosí\(^\text{15}\) and bringing to light gaps in the available historical research on the

\(^\text{15}\) Refer to footnote 4, page 8.
city. It is among the most important sources of information for scholars working on the region to this day.

Peter Bakewell, who specializes in the history of mining in colonial Latin America, has published an impressive amount of material concerning colonial silver production in Potosí. He has authored two important books on the history of silver mining and trade in Potosí: *Miners of the Red Mountain: Indian Labor in Potosí, 1545-1650*, published in 1984, and *Silver and Entrepreneurship in Seventeenth-Century Potosí*, published in 1995. *Miners of the Red Mountain* outlines the complex labor system that made Potosí’s economic boom possible. It is the only available masterwork on Potosí’s labor structure in the early colonial period. *Silver and Entrepreneurship in Seventeenth-Century Potosí* is essentially a historical biography of Antonio Lopez de Quiroga, the most powerful resident of Potosí in the latter half of the seventeenth century. This book offers a more specific view into Potosí’s mining culture at a time when the city’s greatest silver boom had already taken place. Bakewell’s skill at studying archival material provides specific data with which to build a concept of silver’s economic value during the colonial period. His statistical data, gathered from archival research conducted in Bolivia and Spain, provides an excellent basis for communicating the level of silver production in colonial Potosí. Both of these works are essential in that they provide context for how silver propelled Potosí’s economy and societal structure. These works do not contribute to the study of Potosí’s artistic traditions, but they are useful for valuing silver as a raw material. They are also instrumental for understanding of the labor structures that permitted Potosí’s massive growth and subsequent turnout of silver into the regional and global economy during the colonial period.

Another recent monograph of quality on colonial society in Potosí is historian Jane Mangan’s *Trading Roles: Gender, Ethnicity, and the Urban Economy in Colonial Potosí*, published in 2005. Mangan presents a history of colonial Potosí’s market culture, paying special
attention to the roles assumed by indigenous women in the marketplace and in local businesses. Mangan’s book contributes to the measurement of silver’s value in the colonial period because she dedicates one chapter to the study of the credit system in Potosí. The city’s abundance of silver was reserved for the exclusive use of the upper echelons of society, while the general population depended on a credit system, using everyday items in order to make purchases. The thought of being “cash-starved in a city of silver”\textsuperscript{16} is interesting to consider as compared to the examples of exuberance in quantity executed by Potosí’s elites.

\textbf{Alto Perú’s Visual Culture in Silver: A Literature Review}

With regard to the study of Potosí’s artistic traditions, Bolivian scholars Mario Chacón Torres, Jose de Mesa and Teresa Gisbert as well as Cristina Esteras de Martín of Spain are responsible for the most rigorous study of silverwork from the Colonial Period. De Mesa and Gisbert have also published widely on painting, sculpture and architecture styles of colonial Alto Perú. These scholars’ exploration of silver objects generally concerns the history of silverworking styles in colonial Potosí with brief forays into colonial silverwork’s links to Pre-Columbian art. Mario Chacón Torres is a native of Potosí and published his book \textit{Arte Virreinal en Potosí: Fuentes para su Historia} in 1976. Chacón Torres notes that silverwork, which he considers one of the “lesser” arts, deserves more ample and meticulous study, particularly with regard to Potosí as it was the largest silver emporium on the American continent.\textsuperscript{17} Chacón Torres makes his preference towards ecclesiastical works in silver quite clear, but he does dedicate a subchapter of the book to secular/functional objects in silver. This is a nod toward these objects’ worth within

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\textsuperscript{16} Mangan, \textit{Trading Roles}, 113.
\textsuperscript{17} My own translation. Original quotation: “La platería, una de las artes menores, adquiere en Hispanoamérica, especialmente en Potosí, el mas grande emporio argentífero del continente, singular interés y bien merece un amplio y minucioso estudio.” Chacón Torres, \textit{Arte Virreinal en Potosí}, 143.
\end{flushleft}
the artistic traditions of colonial Potosí. The treatment of silver as a “lesser” form of art may be due to the bias concerning painting and sculpture in the study of colonial Latin American art. However, as Potosí contained such an abundance of silver, the material’s value may be reduced as compared to its value in other colonial cities. As a native of Potosí, Chacon Torres has a unique perspective on the city’s history; his preference may be because of this.

Cristina Esteras Martín’s work covers a breadth of styles of silverwork, and her emphasis on resisting a Eurocentric approach to the uniquely “American” quality of Colonial Andean silverwork provided inspiration for this essay. Esteras Martín also mentions that while “silver and gold crowned the life of Peru and Spain for nearly four centuries…these precious metals, beyond their financial value, became primary vehicles from the artistic expression of Peruvian culture. After Peru achieved its independence in 1825, the silver crafts, for all intents and purposes, faded into oblivion except in those regions with very strong cultural traditions, such as the Andean and Alto Perú zones”. This statement is curious in a variety of ways; it raises questions about the differences between the centers of silver production and the peripheries where silver was distributed through trade, and acknowledges the importance of silver in Andean artistic expression. The latter is an exceptional statement because of the tendency to disregard objects categorized as decorative arts (such as silverwork) over fine arts. In addition, the singling out of these crafts as “Peruvian” raises questions of attribution to certain artistic traditions after the fall of the Viceroyalty of Peru. Potosí belongs to a region of the Andes that once encompassed the Viceroyalty, but its links with what is now the Republic of Peru were not as strong as those with the Chaco territories to the south, in what is now the Republic of Argentina. This point merits its own study, but it is an interesting to consider how the perception of silver craftsmanship and

18 “The road to Potosí from Buenos Aires was the axis around which turned the entire political economy of Rio de la Plata.” Hanke, The Imperial City, 29. See also Daniels and Kennedy, Negotiated Empires, 67.
the value of silver as an artistic medium shifted from the colonial period through to the South American Independence movements in the 19th century.

The Value of Silver in Colonial Potosí: Three Case Studies of Utilitarian Objects

Silver objects from Potosí are difficult to discern beyond certain stylistic markers, which are relatively subjective considering that many of these objects are dispersed throughout private and museum collections worldwide. While most silver artworks were made to decorate churches, monasteries, and to serve other ecclesiastical purposes, there were also silver objects meant for secular use. In the words of Esteras Martín, “the profane world—that is to say, the world outside of the church—was not to be outdone in terms of grandeur, as both domestic and public spaces were converted into venues for exhibiting silver”. Secular/functional objects are of particular interest to this study because some are luxury versions of everyday objects used for uniquely “American” activities, such as the consumption of yerba maté tea and coca leaves. It is curious to consider that Potosí’s elite commissioned these kinds of objects, since the consumption of yerba maté and coca are commonly thought to have been reserved for the indigenous population.

One way to distinguish the objects featured in this study is through the concept of transculturation, which has appeared previously in this work as a way to define the object examples featured in this paper. These objects exemplify indigenous Andean traditions within a model that privileges European styles. The objects include a miner’s lamp made of silver, a vessel for holding (and possibly drinking) yerba maté, and a container for holding coca leaves. The assessment of these kinds of objects as examples of transculturation offers a frame to fit the result of two cultures in the process of merging. The three objects selected for discussion in this paper are among the few available examples of utilitarian objects that deliberately reference the transcultural nature of colonial Andean society.
The assessment of colonial Andean silverwork as examples of transculturation contributes to the evaluation of silver’s aesthetic value by offering a frame to fit the result of the juxtaposition between two cultures in the process of merging. These objects embody transculturation in the following ways: Their design, as well as the fact that they were fashioned in silver, gives them a European context. These particular utilitarian objects in silver are featured as examples for measuring silver’s value in colonial Potosí because they incorporate the element of indigeneity in assessing the value of the object. This possibly provides a link between the perception of silver from a Pre-Columbian period into the colonial period beyond depending upon stylistic elements. However, these particular objects date to the 18th century, which weakens the argument that Pre-Columbian artistic traditions may have directly influenced the design. In addition, the idea of creating utilitarian objects in silver originates from European rather than Pre-Columbian traditions of silver artisanship. Each object represents a different indigenous attribute of colonial Alto Peruvian society. They embody regional identity while also contributing to the construction of the American aesthetic tradition.

The first object to be discussed is a miner’s lamp made of silver (figure 2).\(^\text{19}\) This object dates to the mid-18th century and is attributed to the city of Potosí. This object is made of hammered silver. The stem of the lamp features small sculptures of a pickaxe and a shovel placed directly above a sculpture of what appears to be a turkey. A figure of a bird that possibly represents a condor is featured at the top of the stem. This object appears to be very delicately crafted, thus deeming it useless for its original purpose. An example of a colonial-period miner’s lamp from the Andes would provide greater context for the lamp’s shape and design, but a preliminary search for a suitable example was inconclusive. While a miner’s lamp is not a distinctively indigenous object, it is indicative of an activity dominated by an indigenous

\(^{19}\) Querejazu and Ferrer, *Potosí*, 111.
workforce in Potosí. It was certainly an object of great significance to all citizens of colonial Potosí, since the silver industry was solely responsible for the city’s economic boom and immense importance to the maintenance of the Viceroyalty of Perú, the political entity to which the city belonged. This object demonstrates the combination of indigenous identifiers with a European mode of expression; no Pre-Columbian objects in silver represent functional objects save for a few examples that are unconvincing for the purposes of this study.\(^{20}\)

The next object is tentatively described as a “vessel for yerba maté” (figure 3).\(^{21}\) This vessel dates to approximately 1770-80, and is attributed to Alto Perú. It is made of silver and gold, and has been molded, cast, repoussé and chased (a method of crafting metal that sinks the design rather than raising it, such as in repoussé). Features such as the S-shaped feet of the container, the heraldic lion holding a cartouche at the top of the figure, and the crest appearing at the front of the vessel all point to its origins in Alto Perú.\(^{22}\) The vessel also has a lock and keyhole decorated in gold on the front. Yerba maté is a kind of loose-leaf tea that originated from Pre-Columbian Paraguay. It was immensely popular in the colonial period and continues to be widely consumed in South America, especially in the Southern Cone region. Vessels to hold yerba maté tealeaves and coca leaves\(^ {23}\) are native to the Andean/Southern Cone region and represent continuity in indigenous South American cultural traditions from the Pre-Columbian era into the present day. Yerba maté vessels are traditionally made from dried, hollowed-out gourds. The creation of a vessel in silver is exceptional but not completely out of the ordinary, as even in the present day yerba maté containers are crafted in silver for use during special

\(^{20}\) Examples include *aquillas*, or ceremonial drinking vessels, made in gold or silver. One specific example of this is the double-walled beaker with repoussé decoration attributed to the Lambayeque (Sícan)/Chimú, dating to the 14th to 15th century, 15.2 cm, that forms part of the Denver Art Museum collection. King, *Rain of the Moon*, 54.

\(^{21}\) Rishel, *The Arts in Latin America*, 223.

\(^{22}\) Ibid.

\(^{23}\) Ibid., 223-224.
occasions or as collectibles. Yerba maté containers are of principal interest because they are revelatory in assessing how colonial Andean society conceptualized silver as a medium for constructing native objects that appear to have held high value within colonial American society.

The yerba maté container is of particular interest because it contains an inner compartment fitted to the shape of the receptacle that is meant for the sugar used to sweeten the yerba maté tea. This raises the question of whether this object did indeed function to drink yerba maté out of, or if the inclusion of such a minute utilitarian detail was to add a certain intrigue for the observer/commissioner. It also deems the object unique, and thus more valuable according to Bourdieu’s theory of distinction. The use of gold in the object is also important for assessing its monetary worth, as the use of both precious metals signaled greater distinction than an object made just of silver. Speculation on who may have commissioned this piece would require further investigation of art collections in the region; like the miner’s lamp, the commission for this yerba maté vessel signals elite interest in participating in regional activities with indigenous origins.

Another example that deserves mention is a silver coquero, or container for holding coca leaves (figure 4). The use of coca leaves dates to the Pre-Columbian period; the coca plant is native to the Andean region, where its leaves have long been used as a stimulant. Coca was essential to the miners of Potosí in order for them to stay alert during their grueling work. This coquero dates to the 18th century and is attributed to Potosí. The box is made of hammered and repoussé silver, with silver balls at the base serving as stands. The case itself is intricately decorated with birds and floral motifs, and contains a lock and clasp on the front like that of the yerba maté vessel. The elaboration of this kind of container in silver further supports the notion

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that the elite individuals who could afford to commission such objects held these markers of regional identity in high enough regard to want to honor them in silver. However, it must not be forgotten that the abundance of silver circulating in Potosí must have made it easier to commission every kind of desired object, as the volume of the material made its use less exclusive.

What is the purpose of presenting these three examples of utilitarian/transcultural objects elaborated in silver? While they embody indigenous traditions that formed and intrinsic part of colonial Andean society, it would be far-fetched to suggest that they perpetuated Pre-Columbian perceptions of silver’s value, particularly at the cosmological level. The attributed dates of the objects is evidence enough to suggest that any indigenous influence came from daily traditions that had been adopted by a wide range of indigenous communities prior to the Spanish invasion and settlement of the region. What makes these objects so important to the story of silver in colonial Alto Perú is that they not only indicate the development of a uniquely Andean cultural tradition, they also serve to elevate the value of Andean silverwork as aesthetically pleasing and profoundly important for understanding the development of cultural traditions in the region surrounding Potosí. The benefit to studying silver objects is that the material itself has a profound value that is apparent at a global scale, as it forms part of artistic traditions in cultures the world over. The value of silver in Potosí, however, is particularly captivating because of its singular effect on all aspects of the city’s history and the legend of grandeur it helped to build.

**Conclusion**

This paper outlines the context and criteria for ascribing a system of values for silver in the Pre-Columbian and Colonial Andes, with a particular focus on the silver industry’s
importance in colonial Potosí. The Villa Imperial’s booming silver industry combined with the easier passage to the south rather than over the Andes mountain range toward Lima,26 are the main reasons behind this lasting influence. This essay provided a preliminary assessment of silver’s value in the Pre-Columbian Andes and its shift in economic, aesthetic and social value in colonial South America, namely the southern Andes. However, some research elements missing in this essay would greatly enrich the process of valuing silver in the colonial period. A study of the history of the Potosí mint would flesh out the ways that the development of currency in silver affected its value during the colonial period. A more complete study of the history of silver as currency and as a material for artistic production in Europe would also greatly benefit this study. A better understanding of how silver was mined, refined and utilized in Europe would reveal how the colonial authorities from Spain conceived of their relationship with silver in the Americas.

In a way, the lack of study of silver craftsmanship in colonial South America is understandable; the favoritism toward “fine arts” such as painting and sculpture over the “lesser” arts in the discipline of art history places silver objects at a disadvantage, and the quantity of objects elaborated in this precious metal makes them less distinctive. However, silver’s remarkable history in the Americas merits attention because of how instrumental this material was in sustaining the Spanish empire in South America. Its value to the history of Latin America in the present day is evident in the rich silver material culture present throughout the Southern Cone region, where silver was widely dispersed from Potosí due to the aforementioned ease in travel and the increased trade through the port of Buenos Aires. Through the study of Potosí’s silver trade and craftsmanship practices, a great deal may be revealed about the formation of Andean/Southern Cone artistic traditions and their impact on the formation of regional identity.

26 Daniels and Kennedy, Negotiated Empires, 67.
Figure 1. Contemporary map of Bolivia featuring Potosí. Photo courtesy of <http://geology.com/world/bolivia-satellite-image.shtml>.
Figure 2. Miner’s Lamp; hammered silver; mid 18th century; Iturralde and Costa collection, La Paz. Photo courtesy of Querejazu and Ferrer, Potosí, 111.
Figure 3. Vessel for yerba maté; ca. 1770-80; Alto Perú; Silver and gold, molded, cast, repoussé, and chased (sinking rather than raising the metal); private collection. Photo courtesy of Rishel, *The Arts in Latin America*, 223.
Figure 4. Coquero (container for holding coca leaves); Potosí, 18th century; hammered and repoussé silver. Viaña collection, La Paz. Photo courtesy of Querejazu and Ferrer, *Potosí*, 111.
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