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With the arrival of European colonists in Latin America, the introduction of Spanish and Portuguese architecture, sculpture, and painting came as well. Already present were artistically sophisticated indigenous societies of exceptional skill. The creative works that resulted from the union of these highly different cultures distinguish the prolific colonial art of Latin America in world art history.

In his book, A History of Latin American Art and Architecture, Leopoldo Castedo discusses how the forms imported from Europe were transformed by historical and environmental forces into distinctive American breeds. He notes how contrasting geography and different availability of materials gave rise to extremely varied artistic forms and color. For example he compares a church in Zacatecas using the regional tan stone of the north of Mexico with a church in Arequipa using the white stone of its locale in the southern area of Peru. There is a predominant use of white in the naturally colorful tropics as opposed to the audaciously invented color used in some of the monotone arid geographic areas. Castedo notes further that the amount of exposure a site has to the European culture affected the degree of the new influences on artistic forms.

Colonial art functioned as a vehicle used by the ruling authority to prompt the political and religious transformation of the country. For example, indigenous religious structures were replaced with Christian churches. The art contributed to the social unification of the new society and characteristics from both worlds influenced it to varying degrees. Castedo explains that in the religious art considerable adaptations were necessary because of the lack of craftsmen trained in the skills and traditions of the Old World. He also describes the indigenous atavistic instinct that persisted according to the strength of their artistic roots. For example, indigenous flora and fauna were carved on facades and interiors of churches. The cross-culturalizations of forms and symbols helped missionaries convert when they did not subvert to his cause. Also, Castedo explains local parishioners provided models for church artists. For Example, the anonymous Mexicans of Tonantzintla carved a celestial court composed wholly of Indians, and the Evangelists created by the Brazilian mulatto artists Manuel da Costa Ataíde and Aleijadinho in Ouro Preto are mulattoes. Thus the art became more popular based, not exclusively an aristocratic art.

Early architectural designs followed Iberian models. Castedo describes how the churches incorporated Spanish plateresque, a filigree carving technique (from plateros de yeso or "silversmiths in plaster") covering buildings and walls of the 16th century.



The first substantial modifications in Spanish plateresque were made in Mexico. In order to provide shelter in time of danger for the sizable number of Indians and mestizos in a village, a combination fortress-church was designed in a large scale drawing on Gothic architectural elements such as a lofty nave supported by a network of ribs. These aesthetic and functional considerations combined to perpetuate the Gothic style in the New World long after it had been abandoned in Europe.

Another functional requirement led to the use of the Capilla abierta (open chapel) to accommodate the large Indian population that could not attend Mass simultaneously regardless how great the church capacity. Also the posa, a small, square open chapel in each of the four corners of a large walled courtyard, was incorporated in the architectural plan. Both the capilla abierta and the posa originated in Europe, but nowhere were they employed as extensively as in Mexico.

The degree of ornamentation of churches and monasteries varied between the different orders in the New World. For example, Castedo tells how the Franciscans' vow of poverty led in the 16th century to their more conservative churches in a marked contrast to the ornate, grandiose Augustinian churches that reflected the transition from the Gothic to the baroque. When the crown itself set artistic standards, the architecture of the New World was influenced. During the second half of the 16th century, Philip II's stern taste introduced a new restraint in design leading to elements of both the Renaissance and neoclassicism although, as Castedo explains, this new rigidity of the latter could never be imposed without concessions to the baroque Latin American temper.

Baroque architecture in Latin America varied by its location. Castedo describes how when uprooted to the New World, urban Spaniards nostalgically preferred strict adherence to European baroque models of design, yet Creole aristocracy of smaller towns were more receptive to mestizo forms incorporating indigenous concepts. In Mexico, for example, there was a great emphasis on the use of color. This is a consistent artistic trait from pre-Cortesian painting through the twentieth century in Mexico. Color is used in their stonework, polychrome plasterwork, and tilework. Another formal sign of the Mexican baroque is the use of mingling curved and straight forms in the profuse architectural ornamentation with both pre-Columbian and plateresque antecedents.

Baroque elsewhere in Central America manifested a more restrained ornamentation of facades than in Mexico and a lack of polychrome embellishments using instead a plaster of immaculate whiteness. Additionally, their use of wooden architecture in Central America was because of the excellent quality of local timber and its ability to withstand earthquakes better than brick or stone.

The baroque in Quito and the Viceroyalty of New Granada offers unusual design elements characteristic to that area including an abundance of exotic adornment in architectural decoration of foreign tropical flora and fauna as well as Oriental figures. A further characteristic of the art is their color use of gold against a red background.

In Peru baroque architectural elements also show a concern about earthquakes and reflect an intermingling of European and native characteristics. Castedo explains the use of the quincha roofing system where canes, reeds and wood were woven together and covered with plaster or stucco. This atop a Gothic construction resulted in a structure more able to withstand earthquakes. The Spanish in Cuzco recognized the symbolic significance of implanting new artistic formulas in the recently conquered culture, yet at the same time they often incorporated Inca structures within their European style buildings. Indian and mestizo ornamentation in baroque architectural decoration sometimes even included motifs from pre-Hispanic mythology.

Castedo notes that baroque art in Brazil did not have a European and indigenous union as the Portuguese did not find an indigenous labor force with a deep-rooted artistic tradition. However, the sensual figures of angels carved within the elaborate baroque architectural ornamentation are attributed to the mulatto rather than Portuguese tradition.

Painting as well as sculpture contributed to the extensive artistic production in the New World. Sculpture had been a major art form in pre-conquest times and influenced works of the colonial period. Castedo tells of a thoroughly Aztec frieze carved after the Spanish conquest in Cholula, Mexico and of Aztec glyphs found in architectural carvings. Popular images in sculpture such as guardian angels became a major art form and often surpassed their Spanish models.

In painting, however, the European style was dominant. Engravings brought to the New World served as models to the copyists. Manuel Toussaint in his book, Colonial Art in Mexico describes early painting in Mexico as "Christian-Indigenous." It is Christian because the purpose is essentially religious, and Indian in that we sense the indigenous hand, untrained in the newly introduced European methods.

The main areas of painting were religious subjects in churches, specifically those paintings incorporated in retables (alterpieces). In the baroque period painting in Central America reflected the influence of the Spanish masters like Zubaran. Castedo explains that initially, the Mexican's own temperament led him to sweeten the Spanish depiction of the awesome and terrible, although he also notes that modern historians suggest that the appearance of this style much later was due to frustration.

Paintings of 17th century Quito show an influence of Spanish models as well. Castedo suggests that paintings with an Oriental tone are the result of a group of Franciscan artists brought from the Far East.

Most of the artists in Cuzco were anonymous working in the European tradition in sculpture and painting. Their Christian subjects are depicted in planar composition with little variation in style and iconography. Color and costume were very important with gilded brocades and raised-embroideries. Art guilds were formed by churches as a source of revenue as well as to promote the arts, and therefore, innumerable paintings were produced, often unsigned, during this period.

astedo notes that Potosi produced paintings that reflected a marked primitivism with often rigid figures and narrative subjects.

The colonial period is particularly significant to our understanding of the alliance of European and indigenous cultures. Both societies had produced highly sophisticated artforms, and with their meeting they provided a rich legacy for future generations of Latin American art.

References:

Castedo, Leopoldo. A History of Latin American Art and Architecture. Frederick A. Praeger, New York and Washington, 1969

Toussaint, Manuel. Colonial Art in Mexico, University of Texas Press, Austin and London, 1967.

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Slides:

- 269 A The church of T'ioyamba, near Cuzco. In the background is Mount Chicon. This Church is a lovely example of Spanish Baroque.
- 269 B Carved pulpit of the church of San Blas. It was donated by the Bishop of Mollinedo in the 17th century and created by an unknown artist. Even though the work has been attributed to Diego Arias and Luis Montes, most believe it to be the work of Juan Tomas Tuyrotupak, an Indian carver.
- 269 C Detail of 269 B.
- 269 D Typical example of the colonial painting in Cuzco, this one representing the archangel Michael.
- 269 E Another example representing an archangel in a more mannerist style.
- 269 F Detail of 269 E.
- 269 G Characteristic of the Cuzco School, this is one of the famous "Black Christ" figures also called "The Christ of the Earthquakes" or "Lord of Tremors." This is from the Museum of Religious Art in Cuzco.
- 269 H Portrait of Saint Ignacio De Loyola by an unknown artist.
- 269 I This is an example of colonial painting in the mannerist style copied from the European tradition.
- 269 J This is a more sophisticated example of the Baroque style, characteristic of the Cuzco School.