

Colonial Art of Ecuador

Organization of the American States

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If there is one quality that distinguishes and delineates the profile of the admirable Ecuadorian nation it is its austere and inveterate attitude of defiance of historical adversity. Few nations of the Hemisphere can base their individuality as a people on more remote antecedents; no other has struggled and still struggles more stoutly for a definitive statement of its territory and its nationhood.

The patriotic drama of what is today the country of Ecuador began even before the discovery of America, with the rebellion of Atahualpa, son of the Inca Huayna Cápac and his Quito wife. He was, if it can be so phrased, the proto-founder of what was to be the Royal Audiencia of the Spanish Kingdom of Quito, and, ultimately, the Ecuadorian nation.

When the conquistador Sebastián de Benalcázar founded San Francisco de Quito on the ruins of the Inca city, in 1534, he was also fashioning the scene of future conquests and the cradle of new rebellions. And thus it was that one of Pizarro's captains, Francisco de Orellana, defying the authority that conquistador exercised from his headquarters in distant Cuzco, marched from Quito to begin the most fantastic adventure of all times, the discovery and conquest of the Amazon River in all the vastness of its gigantic sweep.

Throughout the colonial era the nation centered in Quito fought to survive, to maintain its own personality and style, under two vicerealties that, one after the other, held jurisdiction over its territory – that of Peru and that of New Granada.

The independence of Ecuador was proclaimed 10 August 1809 but it was only years later that a general in the armies of Bolívar, an exemplary soldier and statesman, Marshal Antonio José de Sucre, sealed the emancipation of the territory from the Spanish Crown on the volcanic slopes of Pichincha itself; that is, at the very gates of the centuries-old city of San Francisco de Quito, expression and symbol of the historical continuity of a nation that might well call itself the Republic of Quito.

The purely geographical present name prevailed, nevertheless, when, once Gran Colombia had been broken up, the country reclaimed its position as an independent nation on the already cosmic map of America.

Though it is named for the equator, the Republic of Ecuador is not all tropical, in the strictly climatic sense of the term. The majority of its cities, on the Andean altiplanos, are strung along the fascinating Avenue of Volcanoes, which contributes so much to the contours of its extraordinarily beautiful landscape. In reality there are two, perhaps three, countries within its geographical borders – the sierra, the coast, and the forest – which have not been easy to weld into a single political bloc. And herein lies, precisely, the great merit of the industrious and patient Ecuadorian nation; a task of integration and reassemblage, in defiance of all political and physical obstacles, of geographic accidents and historical reverses.

From this synthesis, which must be called dramatic for the spectacular action and the grandness of the setting, has arisen, or better, is arising modern Ecuador, heir to the great cultural patrimony to which belong many of the outstanding examples of art and architecture in the Hemisphere and deserving of a shining figure worthy of its great and legitimate national aspirations.

Image Descriptions:

A: Quito is the city of the Americas that has the largest number of religious architectural monuments in the least amount of space. La Compañía, based on the famous Jesuit church of GESU in Rome, is the most ornate of Quito's churches.

B: The façade of the church is the work of Father Leonardo Deubler, who began to work on it in 1722.

C: It was finished by Father Venancio Gaudolfi in 1765. Entirely carved in stone, the façade has two groups of Solomonic columns in the lower part and two side doors flanked by Corinthian pillars.

D: The interior is beautifully decorated in goldleaf and red plasteresco. On special occasions in tabernacle encrusted with precious jewels is used. The remains of Quito's patron saint, Mariana de Jesús, are kept in a gold crypt under the main altar.

E: Eighteenth century Calvary by Manuel Chili (1750-90), better known by his Quechua nickname 'Caspicara' which means Wooden Face.

F: Exhibition of colonial statues of Our Lady of Quito. Held at the museum of the Central Bank of Quito during the month of December, 1974.

G: Our Lady of Quito, same exhibition as above. All of the statues now belong to private collections.

H: Eighteenth century figures from the School of Quito.

I: Miniature eighteenth century Christ, School of Caspicara. Private collection, Quito.

J: Plaza and church of Santo Domingo with the statue of hero José Antonio de Sucre.