

The Indigenous Eye and Other Senses: Creating Convento Art in 16th-Century Mexico

Coordinadores:

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Resumen / Abstract:

Europe's unexpected "discovery" of the Americas beginning in the late 15th inaugurated a period of intellectual, political, social and artistic upheaval that was felt throughout space and time. In a newly globalized world, peoples and regimes formerly unaware of one another not only came into bewildering and often dramatic confrontation but increasingly became culturally, economically, and even genetically intertwined. Certainly, neither emerged from this encounter unchanged. This is true as well of European Christianity, which faced daunting challenges in evangelizing the millions of linguistically and ethnically diverse populations of the Americas. Recognizing their stupendous task in converting the adherents of vibrant beliefs, practices, rituals, pantheons, and cosmological constructs that defined their individual and cultural identities, the Christian missionaries set about to achieve their evangelical task with both passion and practicality. As religions worldwide had always done, the proselytizers utilized a spectrum of visible, aural, and other tangible means to impart intangible values and induce transformed earthly behaviors. The myriad ways in which the friars attempted to displace ancient traditions by foreign Christian concepts and activities, and the results of these efforts, represent the theme of this symposium.

An insight into the way the first friars strategized their campaign of conversion can be gleaned from the multi-pronged educational program of the astonishingly productive Flemish friar Pedro de Gante at the school of San Jose de los Naturales, which adjoined the first Franciscan convento of San Francisco in Mexico City. Young (and perhaps not so young) Nahuas were not only catechized, they were bombarded by a concentrated course in European culture that encompassed not only religious training but an array visual, theatrical, musical, and practical skills as well. As these abilities had been amply encouraged in their own pre-conquest culture, the process was often less that of exposure than to new applications of already well-honed talents, though older (Medieval) and newer (Renaissance) types of knowledge and technologies were also transferred.

The fruits of this type of intensive and expansive education can be found in the art works that remain in the convento complexes built throughout Mexico in the 16th century. Filled with monumental architecture, painted walls, sculpture, altarpieces, vestments, and choir books still visible today, we must add to this vast visual repertoire now-vanished music, song, processions, and performances that were also intended to bridge the distance between home-grown and imported ideas. Such well known works as open chapels that replicated the open spaces of Prehispanic ritual and atrial crosses that employed glyph-like forms to

portray key objects and events in the Passion of Jesus are examples of such innovations. The papers of this symposium will explore how the inventive artists and art works of various 16th-century conventos allied indigenous and European concepts to create the unique world of Mexican Christianity and art.