

theme 2
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abstract

The visual image is a fundamental instrument in communicating complex text; it appeared at the beginning of the Counter-Reformation and was strengthened during the Catholic reformation.

In the Iberian monarchies, religion was (con)fused with state interests. The churches of the Jesuit Missions of Chiquitos in the Paraguay province admirably met the aims of the Society and the Spanish Crown.

We propose studying a process of transmission (inculturation) from a design perspective, based on a representative element of Christian visual culture – the Solomonic column –systematically used in the churches of the Society of Jesus (16th-18th centuries) and specifically those of the Jesuit Missions

of Chiquitos (1691 and 1767), located in the Jesuit Province of Paraguay, in Bolivia.

Our interpretation aims to show how it had become an instrument that conveyed inculturation and a dialogue between very different cultures in the context of acculturation.

keywords

symbolism, visual image, inculturation, churches of the Jesuit Missions of Chiquitos (Bolivia), Solomonic column

The Solomonic Column as a Symbolic Image of Inculturation in the Churches of The Jesuit Missions of Chiquitos (Bolivia).



Inculturation through image

The image is a fundamental instrument in visual processes and design is the disciplinary field that has sought to facilitate communication through it, specifically since the Council of Trent (1545-1563). The 17th century saw the start of “the civilisation of the image, that is, modern civilisation” (Argan 2004: 51). “Teaching dogma through images (...) led to the spectacular style” (Mâle apud Chastel 1988: 384-385) that characterised Baroque art (Wittkower 1988: 51).

We will begin our study in Rome, the centre for disseminating erudite Baroque culture, and continue in Seville, which was the dissemination centre of the Andalusian Baroque and responsible for the missions to the overseas Jesuit provinces, before arriving at Chiquitos.

... in the European context

European painters preceded architects in the ideal representation of Solomon's Temple and its spiral columns, from Fouquet (1470) to Rubens' cartoons (1625).

Alongside painting, treatises on architecture helped disseminate the Solomonic column. The treatise of Vignola (1562), translated into Spanish by Caxés (1593), provided a mathematically simple way of calculating the proportions of Solomonic columns for the first time.

According to tradition, the Solomonic columns used at the altar of the first Christian Basilica founded by Constantine in Rome were brought from the Orient in 332 AD with an air of having belonged to Solomon's Temple.

Later, they were reused in the rebuilding of the new St Peter's Church, and were possibly an inspiration for the construction of the columns of St. Peter's Baldachin (1624), and they constitute one of the models to follow and references to recreate. The treatise of Andrea Pozzo (1693-1698), presents a detailed drawing of spiral columns, reinterpreted at

St. Aloysius Gonzaga's altar at St. Ignatius' Church in Rome.

The treatises by Juan Ricci (1663), Caramuel de Lobkowitz (1678), and Guarino Guarani (1737) also helped disseminate the Solomonic column in the Spanish context. In fact, the Baroque altarpieces of the Society's churches are a meeting point for all the arts, in a curious play between the ephemeral and the perennial (Correa 1990: 16).

The use of ornaments then intensified in Seville's churches, an example of which is the Church of St. Louis of the French (1699-1731), a former Jesuit novitiate. The inside of the church captures the essence of Spanish Baroque culture. The figurative and symbolic content comes together with the Society of Jesus' ideological intentions, using a suggestive iconographic project in the decoration, where Solomonic columns take on a monumental scale, as if they symbolically supported the dome of Heavenly Jerusalem (Prieto 2010: 110).

The Solomonic column in the Chiquitos missions

In European Baroque erudite culture, the Solomonic column was a prestigious element with a great amount of symbolic meaning. The three Chiquitos churches that we are studying – San Rafael (1747-1749) [3], San Xavier (1749-1752) [1] and Concepción (1752-1756) [2] – carry an important vernacular interpretation of the theme. Martin Schmid (in 1761) described them as “large, thick tree trunks, very well carved, as Solomonic columns” (apud Kühne 2010: 219-220). They take on, further to the characteristics described previously, a structural role, rarely considered in the European context.

Epilogue

The Solomonic column, from its (Pagan) origins in Greco-Roman culture and its association with Heavenly Jerusalem through Christian tradition, and based on the dissemination of the Biblical text about Solomon's Temple, was one of the most represented and used visual features in painting, architecture

and the decorative arts in Catholic missions from the end of the 16th century until the end of the 18th century.

Successive appropriations, both erudite and vernacular, of the Solomonic column have transformed its formal configuration, making it a symbol of transmission and inculturation of Christian churches in the “New Indies”.

In the near future, we will test other interpretations of the Solomonic column used in the Jesuit missions of Chiquitos, based on establishing possible relationships with other architectural archetypes (Wittkower 2006: 20-21).

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