

At home in the encyclopaedic museum? Viceregal Latin American Art and its disruptive potential

Victoria Sancho Lobis

After decades of widespread neglect, Latin American and Latino/a art has moved from the edges of visibility within the American museum world towards the spotlight. This refocused interest follows a marked increase in activity within the academic sphere. A dramatic crescendo to these gains came in the form of The Getty Foundation Pacific Standard Time initiative of 2017–2018, which enabled more than seventy projects to be realized across southern California. The exhibitions treated the subject of Latin American and Latino/a art from antiquity to the present, and they took place in all manner of institutions – large civic institutions, small private museums, college and university museums and galleries, as well as unconventional spaces for display. *The New York Times* critic Holland Cotter rightly noted that this effort provided a welcome corrective: ‘Latin American art has had shamefully little museum attention in a country that is, statistically 40 percent Spanish-speaking,’¹ to say nothing of the Lusophone, Anglophone, and Francophone Latin American communities or the Asian diaspora within Latin American society – in southern California and elsewhere.

The Pacific Standard Time initiative also served as punctuation for a broader phenomenon. As Mari Carmen Ramírez noted in her analysis of the event, the project not only legitimized Latin American and Latino/a art within the contemporary and more historical arenas, it also marked a decisive moment for cultural leaders to fashion institutional structures that will provide continued visibility for an increasingly dominant demographic force in our country.² Major civic museums as well as college and university museums have increasingly included Latin American art in their exhibition programs and permanent collections. This long-awaited embrace of Latin American art relies on the groundbreaking work of the institutions that championed the field long before consensus across civic and academic institutions could be imagined. These institutions include:

¹ Holland Cotter, ‘In a Time of Discord, A Gift of Art’, *New York Times*, 22 September 2017.

² Mari Carmen Ramírez, ‘Pacific Standard Time, LA/LA: Latin American and Latina/o Art’s transformative momentum’, *ArtNexus* 108, 40–45. The recognition of Latin American art as material worthy of collecting and display was also reflected by a symposium held recently at the Frick Collection, New York: ‘The Americas Revealed: Collecting Colonial and Modern Latin American Art in the United States’. [Available at: https://www.frick.org/interact/video/americas_revealed](https://www.frick.org/interact/video/americas_revealed) [Accessed 1 March 2019].

the Americas Society, the Blanton Museum of Art, the Brooklyn Museum, Hispanic Society of America, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Denver Museum of Art, and El Museo del Barrio, among others.

In recent years, special interest has been trained on the field of 'Colonial' or Viceregal Latin American art, a period roughly defined by artistic production between 1500 and 1800 in Central and South America as well as the Caribbean.³ The Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) hired its first curator in this area in 2000. The Metropolitan Museum of Art created an analogous position in 2013. The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston and Philadelphia Museum of Art have made major commitments to the field through exhibitions and acquisitions, though neither institution has a curator exclusively dedicated to this area. On a more modest scale, the Art Institute of Chicago has also incorporated Viceregal Latin American art into its exhibitions and permanent collection displays.⁴

Collectively, these projects reflect a broadening of the visual arts canon. Having accepted that Viceregal Latin American art should be represented within the realm of the encyclopaedic art museum, these institutions must decide how best to situate the works. Even the decision to identify these works as 'art' introduces interpretative and evaluative challenges.⁵ Far from being relegated to the arcane bureaucratic processes inherent in so many large museums, considering the place of

³ The period designation for this field of study has not yet found stable terminology. The following terms are all currently in use: Spanish Colonial, Colonial Latin American, and Viceregal Latin American. For a critique of the term 'colonial' see Jonathan Brown, 'Antwerp, Seville, Mexico City—The Spanish Habsburg Road', in *Cristóbal de Villalpando: Mexican Painter of the Baroque*, Mexico City: Fomento Cultural Banamex, 2017, 17–19, and a response to this critique can be found in James Fenton, 'Moses in Mexico', *The New York Review of Books* 64, no. 15, 12 October 2017, 12–14. Attempts to offer more specific stylistic designations have not yet achieved scholarly consensus. For a discussion of 'Andean Hybrid Baroque' a term coined by Gauvin Bailey in his description of South American Viceregal architecture, see Jesús Escobar, 'Review of Gauvin Bailey *The Andean Hybrid Baroque: Convergent Cultures in the Churches of Colonial Peru*', *Art Bulletin* 94, December 2012, 646–648.

⁴ In many ways, this article is a reflection on my involvement in these efforts. As Associate Curator at The Art Institute of Chicago, I organized the museum's first installation of Viceregal Latin American paintings, *A Voyage to South America: Andean Art in the Spanish Empire* (2014–2016). This project was succeeded by a second temporary installation of similar scope: *Doctrine and Devotion: Art of the Religious Orders in the Spanish Andes* (2016–2018), organized by Rebecca Long, Patrick G. and Shirley W. Ryan Associate Curator of European Painting and Sculpture. Concurrent with the latter, several Latin American paintings and decorative arts objects were installed in the Art Institute's American Art wing. Annelise Madsen, Gilda and Henry Buchbinder Assistant Curator of American Art and Elizabeth McGoey, Ann S. and Samuel M. Mencofoff Associate Curator of American Decorative Arts organized this installation.

⁵ For more on this subject see, Carolyn Dean, 'The Trouble with (the term) art', *Art Journal*, Summer 2006, 25–32.

Viceregal Latin American art within the context of the encyclopaedic museum forces us to reconsider entrenched norms that shape museum practice as well as the discipline of art history. As Ernst Gombrich asserted, the humanities depend on a system of values; it is precisely the revision of those values and even the introduction of new ones that maintain the vitality of humanistic inquiry.⁶ Viceregal Latin American art provokes a reassessment of the collectively held values that determine aesthetic quality; the processes by which we establish canons of the visual arts; standards of display and interpretation in museum and gallery contexts; and the narrative boundaries determined by periodization and stylistic terminology. This article will explore the interpretive potential and consequences of different methodologies of display, particularly within the 'encyclopaedic' museum context.⁷ What is at stake is how we frame a compelling tradition in the history of the visual arts that for so long has been invisible within the largest and best funded museums in the United States.

Where we display Viceregal Latin American art determines the historical narrative through which these objects may be understood. The relevance of museum practice in the field of Latin American art can be recognized today in light of the mutually reinforcing work of academic art history and the curatorial practice of art history. These 'two art histories' were importantly identified and considered in relation to each other already twenty years ago, in the symposium and resulting publication organized by Charles W. Haxthausen.⁸ One of the volume's

⁶ E. H. Gombrich, 'Approaches to the History of Art: Three Points for Discussion', in *Topics of Our Time: Twentieth-Century Issues in Learning and in Art*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991, 71–73.

⁷ This article has developed over the course of several years. It incorporates ideas and language presented on several occasions, first in a meeting of the Advisory Council for Colonial Latin American Art at the Art Institute in 2014 and also in public lectures, most recently 'The Multiple Contexts for 'Colonial' Latin American Art', *The Resonant Object: A Symposium to Honor Charles W. Haxthausen*, Clark Art Institute, May 2018; also 'The Place of "Colonial" Latin American Art in the North American Museum', Scripps College, September 2017; 'Agency and Interpretation: The Role of Artists in the Design and Production of Colonial Latin American Art', Loyola University Museum of Art, September 2016; 'Globalism in the Contemporary Museum: The Case of "Colonial" Latin American Art', Claremont McKenna College, March 2016. I thank all those who invited me to speak on these topics, and I am grateful for the comments and questions I received on these occasions. I was not able to attend a 2017 College Art Association panel that engaged a similar subject, 'The Evolving Canon: Collecting and Displaying Spanish Colonial Art', which was chaired by Ilona Katzew and Ellen Dooley.

⁸ The symposium 'The Two Art Histories: The Museum and the University' took place at the Clark Art Institute in Williamstown, Massachusetts, 9-10 April 1999; the proceedings of the symposium were published in 2002: Charles W. Haxthausen, ed., *The Two Art Histories: The Museum and the University*, Williamstown, MA: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 2002.

contributors, Dawn Ades, discussed the display of Latin American art in the space of temporary exhibitions.⁹ Ades's point of departure was an exhibition of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Latin American art. In the intervening twenty years since 'the two art histories,' the field of Viceregal Latin American art has expanded in both academic and museum contexts just as intellectual focus has shifted to consider the organization of – indeed the very conception of – the encyclopaedic art museum as capable of sparking and reflecting intellectual discourse much as the space of the temporary exhibition was recognized in the time of Haxthausen's 'two art histories' symposium.¹⁰ In deciding where to place Viceregal Latin American art objects within the context of the encyclopaedic museum, we must consider the following questions: Are these objects part of the cultural tradition of the Americas? Do they register a persistent American aesthetic? Can we view them as products of a colonial experience parallel to the experience of the Anglo-American and French-American colonies? Or, are they more accurately a reflection of the reach of the specific European powers that disseminated distinctly Spanish and Portuguese cultural traditions? Which of these contexts is most urgently important to foster a proper understanding of these long neglected objects?

To date several strategies have been employed for the display of Viceregal Latin American art. They include isolation, in which a chronological display of Latin American art offers an independent art historical trajectory, spanning art of the ancient Americas through works produced within the last fifty years. At both the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the Denver Art Museum, Pre-Columbian objects were installed adjacent to Viceregal Latin American art. At LACMA, the floor of the Art of the Americas building that was dedicated to Latin American art also included modern art up to approximately 1980; curator and department head Ilona Katzew reflected on this model as offering the chance 'to emphasize a more local narrative.'¹¹ In 2017 and 2018, these institutions took their Latin American

⁹ Ades focused on the exhibition she co-organized in 1989 for the Hayward Gallery in London, 'Art in Latin America: The Modern Era, 1820–1980', Dawn Ades, 'Constructing Histories of Latin American Art', in *The Two Art Histories*, 32–44.

¹⁰ Haxthausen identifies the temporary exhibition as the 'discursive medium' that provided productive interface between the two domains of art history, Charles W. Haxthausen, 'Introduction', in *The Two Art Histories*, xvii. In his recent discussions of the proposed new building for the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Christopher Knight has invoked the concept of the encyclopaedic museum, asserting somewhat uncritically that the values inherent in its organization (division of material according to chronological and regional categories) should be upheld in designing a new building for permanent collection displays. Christopher Knight, 'An Open Letter to Peter Zumthor: Stop dissing L.A.'s art', *The Los Angeles Times*, 9 July 2019; Christopher Knight, 'LACMA, Incredible Shrinking Museum: A critic's lament', *The Los Angeles Times*, 2 April 2019.

¹¹ Correspondence with the author, 6 April 2019. Katzew provided informal commentary on the installation of Latin American art in a post on LACMA's blog from 2013. Available at:

holdings off view in advance of major reinstallations. In the case of LACMA, it is unclear precisely how much gallery space or what configuration will be allocated to this part of the institution's collection. The new central section of the museum's campus, designed by Peter Zumthor, promises a reconception of the conventional divisions along chronological and geographic lines.¹² The Denver Art Museum, which notably houses the United States' largest and most important collection of Latin American visual arts from the Viceregal period, is undergoing a renovation of its North Building, designed by Gio Ponti and constructed in 1971. Jorge Rivas Pérez, head of the New World Department, envisions the reinstallation of these galleries, which will still occupy a distinct floor of the Ponti building, to embrace a 'hybrid approach,' emphasizing a chronological organization spanning the millennia before the Common Era and encompassing Latin American art of the Viceregal, Modern, and Contemporary periods.¹³ The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston unveiled its new Art of the Americas wing in 2010, dedicating a gallery on its first floor to Viceregal art. During its years of operation, the gallery has shifted from a site for displaying important loans from private collections to a showcase for impressive new acquisitions.¹⁴ The museum's Pre-Columbian collections are situated one floor below, together with the permanent collection holdings representing Native North American art. The Metropolitan Museum of Art has somewhat similarly decided to situate its curatorial position within the American art department, and it has allocated a small gallery within its American Art wing for the display of its permanent collection holdings of Viceregal Latin American art. The Brooklyn Museum has incorporated Viceregal Latin American art into its American art narrative. At the Philadelphia Museum of Art, four galleries include works from the Spanish Americas. These are located within the European art wing, where the presentations take the form of independent galleries as well as individual works integrated within presentations of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Spanish, French, and Italian painting.

To explore the consequences of these different installation strategies, we can consider a specific work and the variety of interpretative possibilities that different adjacencies can offer. The work in question is a monumental painting, produced in

<https://unframed.lacma.org/2013/06/17/only-if-it-bothers-you-ruminations-on-the-display-of-latin-american-art>. [Accessed 1 March 2019].

¹² At present, the new Zumthor building, named the David Geffen Galleries, at LACMA is projected to be complete by the end of 2023.

¹³ Conversation with the author, 11 July 2019.

¹⁴ These include, among others: Cuba, *Chest of Drawings (cómoda)*, 1750–1800, mahogany, cedar, and silver hardware, 116.5 x 174 x 89 cm, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 2013.339; Oaxaca, Mexico, *Escritorio* (writing desk), c. 1671, linaloe, granadillo, Spanish cedar, with marquetry and zulaque-filled engraving, 63.1 x 105 x 45.1 cm, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 2010.370; Mexico, *St. Michael Slaying the Devil*, late 16th century, featherwork painting with cut feathers and gilt paper, on paper and copper, ebony frame, 31.4 x 26.4 x 2.5 cm, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 2015.3292.



Figure 1 Unidentified Artist (Active in Cuzco, Peru), *Our Lady of Bethlehem with a Male Donor*, 18th century. Oil on canvas, 243 x 160 cm. Chicago: Carl and Marilynn Thoma Collection.

eighteenth-century Cuzco (Figure 1). Approximately one hundred inches high in its frame, the painting shows a male donor at the lower left of the composition. He appears in the act of venerating a holy statue of Our Lady of Bethlehem, the copatroness of the city of Cuzco.¹⁵ The donor appears to be of indigenous descent because he is shown with his hair worn naturally, that is, not covered with the powdered wigs more commonly used by European men present in the Viceroyalties of New Spain and Peru in the eighteenth century.¹⁶ This work, therefore, offers one of a few extant representations of indigenous South American donors from the time of Spanish rule in the Andes. We can observe that the figure of the statue is elaborately adorned through the use of gold brocade in the statue's vestments and through extensive personal ornamentation – in the form of rings, earrings, and hair ornaments, all in gold. As is common among works like these, often referred to as

¹⁵ My interpretation of this painting relies on an unpublished collection catalogue entry authored by Suzanne Stratton-Pruitt. I am grateful to her for sharing this text with me, among many others.

¹⁶ Also described in these terms by Rosario Inés Granados-Salinas, 'Miraculous Narratives: Time and Space Collide in Spanish Colonial Painting', in *Circulación: Movement of Ideas, Art, and People in Spanish America*, Meyer Center Symposium XVI, Readings in Latin American Studies, ed. Jorge Rivas Pérez, Denver: Denver Art Museum, 2018, 127–128.

dressed statue paintings (*trampantojos a lo divino*, divine tricks), two different systems of illusionism have been engaged: the donor is described with volumetric illusionism while the venerated statue appears largely two-dimensional, with the exception of the description of her face. These seemingly incongruent systems of representation in fact serve to emphasize the primary function of these paintings, and indeed the statues that they represent, which in both cases is to mediate between the spaces of the earthly and the divine.¹⁷

For viewers acculturated to seeing paintings produced in Europe or the United States between the years 1500 and 1800, *Our Lady of Bethlehem* poses some interpretative challenges. Like most paintings produced in South America during this period, no individual artist is attached to the production of the work.¹⁸ This general dearth of named authors contrasts the greater number of individual artists attached to paintings produced in New Spain (present-day Central America north of Panama). Without artistic biography to attach to the work, who should be assigned agency in the creative process? If we follow Foucault's suggestion that 'the author is not an indefinite source of significations which fill a work,'¹⁹ our ability to engage with a work of art should not be predicated on the identity of an individual author. Yet, we have attached so much narrative force to the biography of makers, it is hard to accept an object – particularly one produced after 1500 – as significant when the maker cannot be identified.

Typical of the genre, the surface area of *Our Lady of Bethlehem* is dominated by the representation of the statue, which is oriented frontally, directly parallel to the picture plane. As mentioned above, the composition also includes the representation of a donor. The representation of donor portraits can trace its origins in European art to the fifteenth century within the arena of panel painting and earlier in illuminated manuscripts. If we display *Our Lady of Bethlehem* adjacent to a work like Francisco Zurbarán's *Immaculate Conception with Two Young Noblemen* (Figure 2), we emphasize that tradition. In Zurbarán's painting we also see male donors performing their piety and acting as intercessors between the space of the viewer and the space of the divine.²⁰ The donor in *Our Lady of Bethlehem* represents a

¹⁷ An excellent discussion of the genre can be found in Maya Stanfield-Mazzi, 'Painted Statues', in *Object and Apparition: Envisioning the Christian Divine in the Colonial Andes*, Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2013, 137–75.

¹⁸ For a discussion of the identity of artists working in the Viceroyalty of Peru, see Teresa Gisbert, 'La identidad étnica de los artistas del Virreinato del Perú', in Ramón Mujica Pinilla et al., *El barroco peruano*, Lima: Banco de Crédito, 2002, 99–143.

¹⁹ Michel Foucault, 'What is an Author', in *The Essential Foucault: Selections from The Essential Works of Foucault 1954–1984*, eds Paul Rabinow and Nikolas Rose, New York: The New Press, 1984, 390.

²⁰ Jonathan Brown has discussed this painting as 'curiously anachronistic' in its non-naturalistic representation of the symbols of the Immaculate Conception. It is interesting to consider this interpretation in conjunction with the compositional elements also present in *Our Lady of Bethlehem*, which includes banderoles, for example, comparable to the text



Figure 2 Francisco de Zurbarán, *The Immaculate Conception with Two Young Noblemen*, 1632. Oil on canvas, 252.1 x 168 cm. Barcelona: Museo de Arte de Cataluña.

different performance of faith in that his prerequisite conversion provides additional testimony to the strength of his belief. As Luisa Elena Alcalá has commented, 'The Indian as exemplary Christian who experienced miracles became a product and construct of colonization, commemorated in both images and texts.'²¹ The donor represented here is one such figure, one whose agency in commissioning the work should nevertheless be recognized.

A further juxtaposition of *Our Lady of Bethlehem* with another dressed statue painting demonstrates the significance of the identity of the venerating figures. In this small-format painting on panel (Figure 3), Aymara Indians adopt the dress of another indigenous community, the Chunchos.²² Here, the performance of faith is doubled by the assumption of an alternate identity. Compared with *Our Lady of Bethlehem*, the act of veneration is placed more explicitly within the context of conversion in that the indigenous figures wear collars, headdresses, and textiles clearly associated with local communities. Where do we locate agency in the

emerging from the mouths of the male donors in Zurbarán's painting. See Jonathan Brown, *Francisco de Zurbarán*, New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1991, 72–75.

²¹ Luisa Elena Alcalá, 'The Image of the Devout Indian: The Codification of A Colonial Idea,' in Ilona Katzew, ed., *Contested Visions in the Spanish Colonial World*, Los Angeles and New Haven: Los Angeles County Museum of Art and Yale University Press, 2011, 227.

²² Diana Fane, ed., *Converging Cultures: Art and Identity in Spanish America*, New York: Brooklyn Museum of Art in association with Harry N. Abrams, 1996, 227.



Figure 3 Unknown. *The Virgin Mary with Indian Donors*, 1752. Oil on wood panel, 26 x 19.2 x 1 cm. New York: Brooklyn Museum. Museum Expedition 1941, Frank L. Babbott Fund, 41.1275.225. Photo: Brooklyn Museum, 41.1275.225_PS4.jpg.

production of a painting like this one? Scholars like Kenneth Mills have discussed the genre of statue paintings as reflective of a process of joint creation, in which Indians and Spaniards were joint participants in the rise and affirmation of local devotions in Spanish America, manifestations of ‘micro-Christendoms.’²³ Following Mills’s reading, we can understand these works to be simultaneously reflective of the indigenous culture attached to their place of production (Latin America) while also originating in certain respects (subject matter, format) in Europe.

While the presence of donor figures within devotional paintings may be somewhat familiar to a general museum visitor in the United States, the iconography of dressed statue paintings is not necessarily within their frame of reference. By definition, the paintings refer to other works of representation – sculptures that are dressed in specific vestments according to the liturgical calendar. These sculptures also possess miracle-working power, and in some cases, the painted representations of them were brought into contact with the ‘original’

²³ Kenneth Mills, ‘Religious Imagination in the Viceroyalty of Peru’, in *The Virgin, Saints, and Angels: South American Paintings 1600–1825 from the Thoma Collection*, Milan: Skira editore S.p.A., 2006, 27–39. For further discussion of the idea of ‘micro-Christendoms’, a term invoked by Mills and attributed to Peter Brown, see Peter Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom*, 2nd ed., Oxford: Blackwell, 2003, cited by Mills in ‘Religious Imagination in the Viceroyalty of Peru’, under note 5, 38.

sculpture in order to confer those powers to the painting as well.²⁴ Despite their often-monumental scale, statue paintings were typically intended for domestic contexts and may have been used as aids in prayer. This comes as a surprise for those accustomed to seeing large-scale devotional works as commissions for more public devotion at church altars. As a genre, dressed statue painting has its origins in Spain, but became emblematic of the so-called Cuzco school, emerging in the late seventeenth century and proliferating through present-day Peru, Bolivia, and Ecuador through the end of the eighteenth century. As Luis Eduardo Wuffarden has commented:

... the genre cannot be considered a provincial or 'primitive' work derived from the great 'cultured' models; instead it represents a distinct style that developed simultaneously in response to local aesthetic and devotional preferences, one that became the dominant south Andean pictorial language in the eighteenth century.²⁵

Once the genre itself becomes familiar, how does a general visitor understand the aesthetic norms that determine how such paintings look? As mentioned above, *Our Lady of Bethlehem*, like many other examples of the dressed statue-painting genre, insists on the flatness of the principal figure. In a recent essay titled 'How to Look at Mexican Old Masters,' Eduardo de Jesús Douglas summarized the challenge specific to Viceregal Latin American painting as follows:

For those who looked at Latin American painting in the colonial period from the vantage point of Europe and the 'Old Masters' of the European canon, much of it appeared unschooled, derivative, naïve, and provincial – too similar to satisfy Old World desires for the exotic and the other; and insufficiently American for New World sensibilities.²⁶

In even more specific terms, Luisa Elena Alcalá compared the criticism levelled at paintings from New Spain versus those from the Viceroyalty of Peru:

²⁴ One example of this practice is manifest in a painting by Joaquín Gutiérrez (about 1715–1805), *Our Lady of the Rosary of Chiquinquirá*, 1767, oil on copper, 20.3 x 26.7 cm, Carl and Marilynn Thoma Collection; the reverse of the copper support for this painting includes the artist signature and the declaration that the painting was touched to the original miraculous image 'tocada en su original'.

²⁵ Luis Eduardo Wuffarden, 'From Apprentices to "Famous Brushes": Native Artists in Colonial Peru', in *Contested Visions in the Spanish Colonial World*, Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2012, 264.

²⁶ Eduardo de Jesús Douglas, 'How to Look at Mexican Old Masters', *Apollo Magazine*, September 2017, 82.

Painting from New Spain was underappreciated because it was considered closely related to Spanish art but did not seem to attain the heights of the Iberian masterpieces; consequently it was labelled derivative.

Paradoxically, for South America, negative assessments were based on the contrary impression; it was too different from the European models and was thus relegated to the sphere of the naïve, popular or, at most, charming.²⁷

The freight of these long-standing prejudices is especially relevant when we consider the parameters for displaying paintings produced in the Viceroyalties of Peru and New Spain.

Cultural historian Lisa Lowe has commented on the tacit authority of museum displays, carried out through the standards of classification and selection that so often go unexamined: ‘...museums are a material pedagogy that positions not only subject and object but also past and present, the living and the dead.’²⁸ One of the operative standards is the primacy of paintings in our collective valuation of artistic production, with sculpture, works on paper, decorative arts, and textiles all trailing in our association with art historical significance. It should not be surprising that those who seek to advance respect for Viceregal Latin American art have given special attention to paintings in the conception of major loan exhibitions and scholarly publications.²⁹ This has put the entire field of Viceregal Latin American art at a disadvantage in that paintings were not necessarily the most valued objects in early modern Meso- and South America.³⁰

If we consider an installation of *Our Lady of Bethlehem* in dialogue with a Pre-Columbian textile such as one produced around 1000 C.E. in the Central Coast of Peru (Figure 4), we appreciate the significance of pattern and colour in both objects. These aesthetic elements were robustly developed as a system of meaning in the textile tradition of the Andes beginning before the time of Christ and continuing to the present day. This juxtaposition asserts that the flatness employed in so many dressed statue paintings does not reflect a deficiency of artistic ability, but rather a

²⁷ Luisa Elena Alcalá, ‘“Where do we go from here?”: Themes and Comments on the Historiography of Colonial Art in Latin America’, in *Art in Spain and the Hispanic World: Essays in Honor of Jonathan Brown*, ed. Sarah Schroth, London: Paul Holberton publishing in association with Center for Spain in America, 323–48.

²⁸ Lisa Lowe, ‘New Worlds “Discover” Asia’, *American Quarterly* 68, no. 2, June 2016, 9.

²⁹ Ilona Katzew, ed., *Painted in Mexico, 1700–1790: Pinxit Mexici*, New York: DelMonico Books, Prestel, 2017; Luisa Elena Alcalá and Jonathan Brown, eds, *Painting in Latin America, 1550–1820*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014.

³⁰ An important exception to this emphasis took the form of the exhibition *The Colonial Andes: Tapestries and Silverwork, 1530–1830*, held at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 29 September–12 December, 2004. Elena Phipps, Johanna Hecht, and Cristina Esteras Martín, eds, *The Colonial Andes: Tapestries and Silverwork, 1530–1830*, New York and New Haven: The Metropolitan Museum of Art and Yale University Press, 2004.

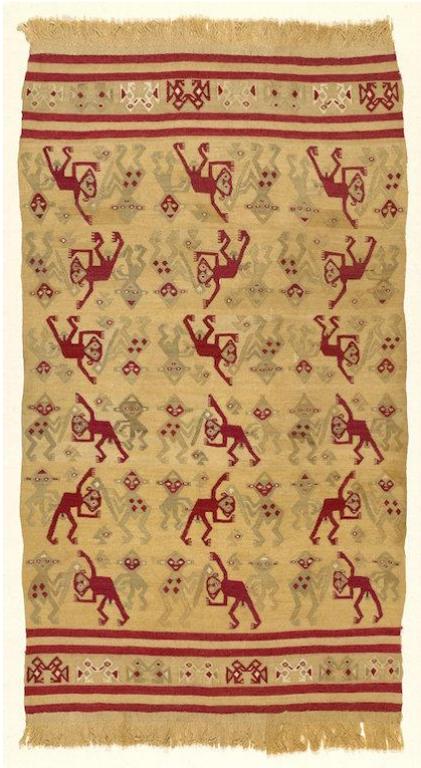


Figure 4 Probably Chancay, central coast, Peru, *Panel*, 1000/1476. Cotton and wool (camelid), 91.4 x 48.6 cm Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago. Kate S. Buckingham Endowment, 1955.1680.

preference for a system of meaning that predates the arrival of Europeans in South America.

The comparisons offered thus far explore the interpretative potential of three different contexts for display: adjacent to European art of roughly the same chronological period, in isolation with other objects from Viceregal Latin America, and adjacent to Pre-Columbian objects from the same geography but different chronological moment. How can we imagine a context for *Our Lady of Bethlehem* that would create an integrated hemispheric narrative, incorporating artistic production in the Anglo-American and French-American colonies? In the case of the former, the tradition that has long defined the dominant historical narrative of American art, we find relatively few objects that materialize a performance of faith. The sobriety that characterizes the materials and aesthetic sensibilities of so many North American colonial paintings also seems to resist comparison with the greater visual exuberance of Latin American painting of the same period.

More fruitful hemispheric narratives may be created within the genre of portraiture, as has been demonstrated in several temporary exhibitions and even in a few permanent collection installations.³¹ Beginning in April of 2016, the Art

³¹ This subject was thoroughly explored in a symposium at the Denver Art Museums in 2014. For the proceedings, see Donna Pierce, ed., *New England/New Spain: Portraiture in the Colonial Americas, 1492–1850*, Frederick and Jan Mayer Center for Pre-Columbian and Spanish

Victoria Sancho Lobis At home in the encyclopaedic museum? Viceregal
Latin American Art and its disruptive potential

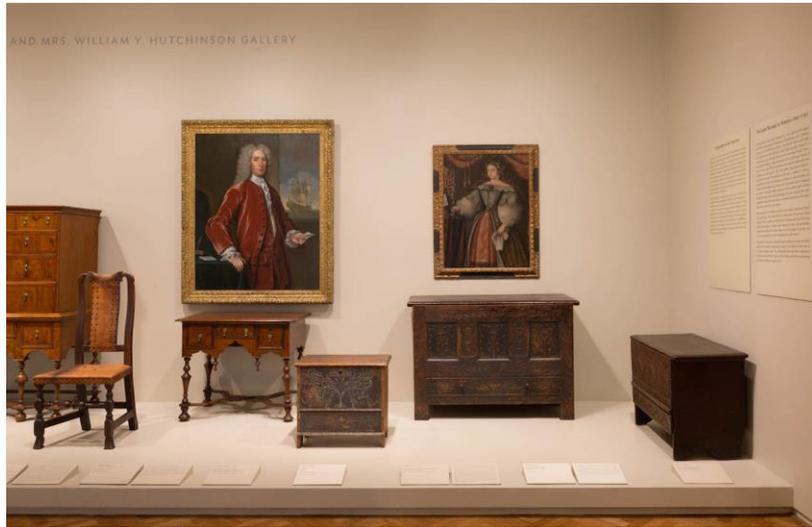


Figure 5 Installation view, American Art galleries, 2016. Art Institute of Chicago



Figure 6 John Smibert (1688–1751), *Richard Bill*, 1733, Oil on canvas, 127.6 x 102.2 cm
Art Institute of Chicago, 1944.28.

Figure 7 Unknown artist (active in Peru, 17th century), *Portrait of a Lady*, 1670/1700.
Oil on canvas, 90.8 x 68.6 cm. Chicago: Carl and Marilyn Thoma Collection.

Institute of Chicago began exhibiting paintings and decorative arts from Viceregal Latin America adjacent to similar types of objects produced in the North American colonies. A photograph of one section of the installation in the museum's American

Colonial Art, Denver: Denver Art Museum, 2016. Portraits from New England and the Spanish Americas were shown adjacent to one another in an exhibition of recent years. See Richard Aste, ed., *Behind Closed Doors: Art in the Spanish American Home, 1492–1898*, New York: Brooklyn Museum of Art and Monacelli Press, 2013.

Art wing shows how two portraits, one produced in New England and one made in Cuzco, were installed on the same gallery wall (Figure 5). As in the previous comparison of *Our Lady of Bethlehem* with a Zurbarán painting, we are here confronted with another case of an attributed painting (Figure 6) paired with an unattributed work (Figure 7). The attributed painting, an oil on canvas portrait by John Smibert, also has an identified sitter, Richard Bill, while neither the sitter nor the artist can be identified in the Cuzco school work. The similarity of rhetorical devices within the portraits is nevertheless striking: both individuals are shown at three-quarter length; both are placed in close proximity to the space of the viewer; both rest a hand on an accommodating piece of furniture; both figures appear in garments proclaiming their wealth – whether through the sumptuous textures and iridescence of Bill's red suit or the layered silks and laces in the Peruvian portrait. In the comparison of *Our Lady of Bethlehem* to Zurbarán's *Immaculate Conception*, the function of the works is quite similar if the stylistic conventions may differ. Here, by contrast, the subjects of the works are also the heroes of their stories: enterprising and prosperous Americans with the means to possess all the objects that surround them – within the space of the picture but also contained within the space of the museum's gallery.

These examples demonstrate how objects produced in Viceregal Latin America create different interpretative opportunities depending on the contexts in which they are installed. Just as *Our Lady of Bethlehem* could find a suitable site for display within the European, Pre-Columbian, New World, or American departments of an encyclopaedic museum, an example of Talavera ware (Figure 8) easily finds a sympathetic comparison with Italian majolica (Figure 9), Spanish lusterware (Figure 9), Islamic fritware (Figure 10), or Chinese porcelain (Figure 11).³² Indeed, such comparisons allow us to appreciate how new visual traditions emerged as a result of the circulation of ideas, materials, and people.³³ This narrative of trade has motivated temporary exhibitions, but it rarely serves as the anchor for permanent collection displays.³⁴

In her study of late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century trade and political structures, Lisa Lowe encourages her readers to consider 'the intimacies of four

³² Margaret Connors McQuade, *Talavera Poblana: Four Centuries of a Mexican Ceramic Tradition*, New York: Americas Society, 1999.

³³ This is precisely the theme of the most recent Meyer Center Symposium, Jorge Rivas Pérez, ed., *Circulación: Movement of Ideas, Art, and People in Spanish America*, Meyer Center Symposium XVI, Readings in Latin American Studies, Denver: Denver Art Museum, 2018.

³⁴ Recent exhibitions with this approach include Amelia Peck, ed., *Interwoven Globe: The Worldwide Textile Trade, 1500–1800*, New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2013, and Dennis Carr, *Made in the Americas: The New World Discovers Asia*, Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; also 'Blue & White Ceramics: An Enduring Global Obsession', Krannert Art Museum, 30 August 2018–31 August 2019, organized by Maureen Warren.

Victoria Sancho Lobis At home in the encyclopaedic museum? Viceregal
Latin American Art and its disruptive potential

continents' – Africa, Asia, Europe, and North America.³⁵ In one chapter, she examines the conspicuous consumption that characterizes Becky Sharp, the protagonist of Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, a novel that the West Indian writer and theorist C.L.R. James reportedly read and re-read. In Thackeray's *Sharp*, James and Lowe find not only an allegory of greed and moral depravity, but also a driving

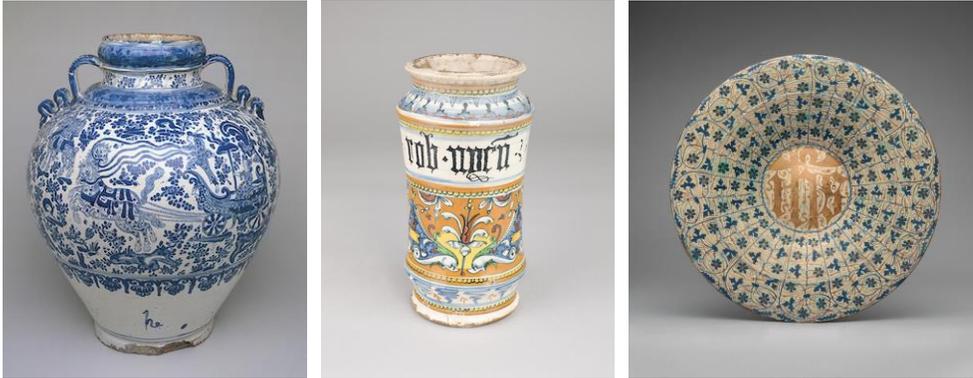


Figure 8 Damián Hernández (attributed), *Jar*, ca. 1660. Tin-glazed earthenware, 47 x 16.5 cm diameter. New York: Hispanic Society of America, E991.

Figure 9 Unidentified artist active in Siena, 16th century, *Apothecary Jar* (Albarello), 1505–25. Tin-glazed earthenware (maiolica), 23.9 x 12.1 cm (diameter). Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, Mr. and Mrs. Martin A. Ryerson Collection, 1937.828.

Figure 10 Unidentified artist, Probably active in Manises, Valencia, Spain, 15th century. *Plate*, late 15th century. Earthenware, tin-glaze (lusterware), 46.3 x 6.6 cm. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 14.40.730.



Figure 11 Unidentified artist, Ottoman Dynasty, active in Turkey, 16th century. *Tankard (Hanap) with Tulips, Hyacinths, Roses, and Carnations*, 1570/1599. Fritware with underglaze painting in blue, turquoise, red, and black, 19.6 x 15 x 10.5 cm. Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, Mary Jane Gunsaulus Collection, 1913.342.

Figure 12 Unidentified artist. *Square-Sided Jar with Dragons, Phoenixes, Cranes, and Auspicious Symbols*, Ming Dynasty, Wanli reign mark and period (1573–1620). Porcelain painted in underglaze blue, 20 cm; diameter of top 8.9cm. Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, Gift of Russell Tyson, 1954.472.

force behind the expansive trade networks that would have delivered her clothing, furniture, and jewellery. A final example of painting from Viceregal Latin America

³⁵ Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2015, especially chapter three, 'A Fetishism of Colonial Commodities', 73–99.

offers a parallel to Thackeray's *Sharp*. The *Portrait of Doña Mariá Rosa de Rivera* (Figure 13) is likewise a product of global trade, a self-conscious demonstration of individual wealth and the proclamation of Lima as home to many of the eighteenth



Figure 13 Pedro José Díaz, *Portrait of Doña Mariá Rosa de Rivera, Condesa de la Vega del Ren*, 1780s. Oil on canvas, 200 x 133 cm. Chicago: Carl and Marilyn Thoma Collection.

century's most prosperous individuals.³⁶ If we think not only of the economic forces behind the trade that would have delivered Doña Mariá's silk, lace, diamonds, and pearls, but also of the exchange of knowledge, customs, and beliefs that would have informed her portrait (as well as *Our Lady of Bethlehem*), we can imagine a museum in which paintings like this one can simultaneously be shown in the American, European, Pre-Columbian, and Asian contexts. The increasing commitment to the display of Viceregal Latin American art affords us an opportunity to review the values underpinning what is and is not shown in our encyclopaedic museums. Perhaps more importantly, this commitment also provides a welcome opportunity to disrupt the very categories that define spaces of display, and consequently, uphold a fiction of self-contained cultural production.

Victoria Sancho Lobis is a scholar, curator, and non-profit administrator with recent experience at the Art Institute of Chicago and Claremont McKenna College. Lobis worked full-time for the Art Institute of Chicago from 2013 through 2017, and she is currently engaged there as a guest curator. In 2014, Lobis realized the Art Institute's first presentation of Viceregal Latin American painting: *A Voyage to South America: Andean Art in the Spanish Empire*.

vslobis@gmail.com

³⁶ Suzanne Stratton-Pruitt, *The Virgin, Saints, and Angels: South American Paintings 1600–1825 from the Thoma Collection*, Milan: Skira editore S.p.A., 2006, cat. no. 54, 210–211.

Victoria Sancho Lobis At home in the encyclopaedic museum? Viceregal
Latin American Art and its disruptive potential



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)