

# Circulation of Ideas and Transformation of Catholic Art in Santiago, Chile, 19<sup>th</sup> Century<sup>1</sup>

Fernando Guzmán

*Center of Cultural Heritage, Adolfo Ibáñez University, Santiago of Chile*

**ABSTRACT** Starting in the last four decades of the nineteenth century, a discourse regarding colonial art began to develop in Chile. This discourse's judgments and observations addressed artworks produced before independence from Spain, which began in 1810, but also those paintings and sculptures that, following the traditions adopted in colonial workshops, continued to be manufactured and sold well into the nineteenth century. In the set of texts discussing this topic, we detect two main concerns. On the one hand, these discussions reveal a preoccupation relating to the artistic value of the architecture, paintings, and carvings; and on the other, of the artworks' ability to promote religiosity. Without a doubt, in the course of this century, it appears that the prevalent opinion had determined that colonial artworks did not contribute to the development of what was then considered in good taste and that its presence in churches referred to forms of devotion that had to be overcome.

**KEYWORDS** art, devotion, circulation.

The complete eradication, during the second half of the nineteenth century of Baroque altarpieces in the five colonial churches that still remain in Santiago, exemplifies and therefore bespeaks perhaps more eloquently about this phenomenon of rejection by the colonial art, than that presented in the existing literature. In a few decades, hundreds of Solomonic columns, gilded reliefs, sculptures, and paintings were removed from the city's churches, and in their stead were installed altars and images that promoted what was considered good taste and healthy religiosity.<sup>2</sup>

The conclusions about colonial art were a specific manifestation of the critical balance that began to develop during the period prior to Independence.<sup>3</sup> Juan Egaña, a lawyer, writing in 1819,

---

<sup>1</sup> Part of the contents of this article are the fruit of a three-month stay in the library of the Getty Research Institute as Guest Scholar.

<sup>2</sup> However, the phenomenon of colonial art's rejection has different nuances that must be acknowledged. Many artworks continued to hold artistic value and colonial art was regarded as evidence of the past and thus its preservation was promoted in various ways. Two good examples of this are the 1873 exposition "La Exposición del Coloniaje" in Santiago and Sarmiento's writings, which appealed to the need to conserve colonial art. See VICUÑA MACKENNA, Benjamín, *Catálogo razonado de la Exposición del Coloniaje*, Imprenta del Sud-América, de Claro i Salinas, Santiago, 1873. J. A. García Martínez, *Sarmiento y el arte de su tiempo*, Emecé Editores, Buenos Aires, 1979.

<sup>3</sup> SUBERCASEAUX, Bernardo, *Historia de la Ideas y de la Cultura en Chile*, Editorial Universitaria, Santiago, Tomo I, 1997, p. 10. This source discusses the paradox of the search for identity from the denial of tradition.

argued that the nation could not be established on the Spanish heritage. “Because they have not possessed greater culture, nor have allowed any of it within our countries, and have proceeded to destroy unexploited that which they found in the indigenous one”.<sup>4</sup> Subsequently, in 1842, José Victoriano Lastarria, a Chilean intellectual, presented at the Universidad de Chile his memoirs titled *Investigaciones sobre la influencia social de la conquista y del sistema colonial de los españoles en Chile*. In which he explains what he judges to be “Spain’s system and deadly influence on our customs and inclinations”<sup>5</sup> or “the darkness of colonialism”.<sup>6</sup> The Universidad de Chile’s rector, the Venezuelan Andrés Bello, while considering Lastarria’s work as impartial, stated that the colonial system “shackled the arts, thwarted the ability of thought to fly, and blinded even the agricultural fertility”.<sup>7</sup> Undoubtedly, these points of view must have permeated the study and evaluation of colonial art.

We must keep in mind that in the middle of the nineteenth century, most of the paintings and sculptures that Chileans had access to or could observe dated from the colonial period. The works by Monvoisin, Rugendas, o Cicarelli were exceptional artworks that circulated mainly within private circles and thus fundamentally among the elite. The enormous gilded altarpieces as well as those following the German Baroque style that the Jesuits had introduced were present in all the churches in Chile.<sup>8</sup> Thousands of paintings and polychrome sculptures in wood executed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries could still be seen regularly in the churches in Santiago and other cities in Chile. As Maturana’s description of the Iglesia de San Agustín in Santiago attests: “The altars were a forest of columns: some straight and other crooked, some emerging out of their own baseboards. Other ones were in the shape of angel heads all of them approaching a single cornice in whose borders one could see seraphim with their legs hanging rendered to appear rather comical than religious”.<sup>9</sup>

At the same time, the demand for religious sculptures and paintings executed in a manner that followed previously established patterns, maintained its vigor until the 1860s. The clearest expression of this phenomenon was the immigration of artists from Quito, Ecuador, who established workshops in Central Chile specializing in the manufacture of religious imagery.<sup>10</sup> The Quito artists’ undertakings

---

<sup>4</sup> EGAÑA, Juan, *Cartas pebuences*, Imprenta del Gobierno, Santiago, 1819, p. 2.

<sup>5</sup> LASTARRIA, José Victorino, *Investigaciones sobre la influencia social de la conquista y del sistema colonial del los españoles en Chile*, Impenta del Siglo, Santiago, 1844, p. 134.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 124.

<sup>7</sup> BELLO, Andrés, *Investigaciones sobre la influencia de la conquista y del sistema colonial de los españoles en Chile. Memoria presentada a la Universidad en sesión solemne de 22 de septiembre de 1844, por don José Victorino Lastarria*, en R. E. SCARPA, «Antología de Andrés Bello», Fondo Andrés Bello, Santiago, 1970, p. 83.

<sup>8</sup> GUZMÁN, Fernando, *Representaciones del Paraíso. Retablos en Chile, siglos XVIII y XIX*, Editorial Universitaria, Santiago, 2009, pp. 21-70 y 97-120.

<sup>9</sup> MATURANA CORTÍNEZ, Víctor, *Historia de los Agustinos en Chile*, Valparaíso, Imprenta de Lathrop, 1904, t. II, p. 498.

<sup>10</sup> KENNEDY TROYA, Alexandra, “Circuitos Artísticos Interregionales: De Quito a Chile. Siglos XVIII y XIX”, en *Historia*, n° 31, 98. RODRÍGUEZ VILLEGAS, Hernán, “Artistas en Chile en la primera mitad del siglo XIX”, en *Boletín de la Academia Chilena de la Historia*, n° 100, 337. CORTÉS, Gloria y DEL VALLE, Francisca, “Circulación y transferencia de la

were instrumental in maintaining the forms, style, and other creative features of colonial art, and to promote its continuation they availed themselves of the newly available media, as this newspaper ad from 1844 demonstrates:

“The undersigned, sculptors from Quito, have the honor to inform the respectable public of Santiago that those who have been favored and currently have some oeuvres in the workshop, if they could come to collect them, since they will be awaited until the close of the months. They wish to inform as well that having a contract in the south, they are thinking of retiring and leaving Telésforo Allende, professor of this type of art, in charge of their workshop. Ignacio Jácome and Pedro Palacios.<sup>11</sup>

This consideration concerning colonial art, therefore, is not only in consideration of the past, because its forms remain relevant in the paintings and sculptures executed by Quito artists and their followers. In 1849, Miguel Luis Amunátegui published his *Apuntes sobre lo que han sido las bellas artes en Chile*, in which he references and comments on those artworks dating from the viceregal period that he considers most relevant. When referring to the work of painters and sculptors who perpetuated the colonial forms, he declares that even now: “we receive from time to time a well assorted swarm of paintings of all sizes from Quito”.<sup>12</sup> In that same year was published in Santiago the chronicles of Domingo Faustino Sarmiento describing his travels throughout Europe, Africa, and America. Where the author surmises: “the artistically\_refined Rome would cover her face with shame if she could see how we raise very high some of crucifixes made with bastard forms that diminish the dignity of the Son of God”.<sup>13</sup> Following in this same vein are Pedro Lira’s declarations about the damage that the Quito school would inflict upon the artistic taste of the people of Santiago. He stating: “the constant introduction of its numerous paintings should exert a most precise influence among us: our frequent sightings of them should end up making us lose all artistic sentiment and idea, accustoming\_the eye to observe all types of defects and no beauty”.<sup>14</sup> Lira’s opinions are additionally, a good example of the projection in time of certain convictions forged by mid-century. As Josefina de la Maza states, it appears that has to do, in most cases, with the careless reiteration of socially accepted values and not points of view formulated from an unbiased evaluation of artworks.<sup>15</sup> Perhaps therein lies precisely their interest, in the fact that it has to do with a critical stance on colonial art, particularly that produced by Quito artists working in Santiago, which was universally accepted and assumed in the nineteenth century without questioning its legitimacy.

---

imagen: pintura quiteña en Chile en el siglo XIX”, en *Arte quiteño más allá de Quito*. Memorias del seminario internacional. Fonsal, Quito, 2010, pp. 182-195

<sup>11</sup> *El Mercurio*, n° 4984, Valparaíso 18 de noviembre de 1844, sin número de página.

<sup>12</sup> AMUNÁTEGUI, Miguel Luis, *Apuntes sobre lo que han sido las bellas Artes en Chile*, en «Revista de Santiago», 1849, t. III, pp. 44-52, p. 45.

<sup>13</sup> SARMIENTO, Domingo Faustino, *Viajes en Europa, África i América*, Imprenta de Julio Belín i Cia, Santiago, 1849, p. 414.

<sup>14</sup> LIRA, Pedro, “Las Bellas Artes en Chile”, *Anales de la Universidad de Chile*, 1866, p. 279.

<sup>15</sup> DE LA MAZA, Josefina, *De obras maestras y mamarrachos*, ediciones metales pesados, Santiago, 2014, p. 30.

The discourse about the little artistic value of colonial painting and sculpture appears to be closely linked to the idea that their presence in churches promoted an inappropriate piety. Mario Góngora states that the enlightened Catholic thought supposedly promoted respect for the Church's official liturgy and rejected the manifestations of popular devotion,<sup>16</sup> postures that characterized the Chilean elite's thought of the nineteenth century.<sup>17</sup> In his writings, the priest José Ignacio Víctor Eyzaguirre describes the inconvenience of certain practices of piety. That consist of “appliances that nowadays appear as shocking and repugnant with the current customs”,<sup>18</sup> declaring “a more enlightened piety would work to eradicate from such ceremonies anything accompanying them that is profane and repugnant abominable to the faith that inspires and directs them”.<sup>19</sup> The purging of the traditional practices of piety required a reform of Catholic art, and included overcoming what Lastarria deemed to be the superstitions of the settlers<sup>20</sup> and the suppression of traditional religious. Sarmiento maintains that the religious sculpture of Latin America “with their faces painted and their pallet trappings or brocade, exposing the elevated spirits to fall prey to the mistake of the iconoclasts.”<sup>21</sup> In accordance with “forty years of efforts to banish the images dressed with cloth”<sup>22</sup> that the Cabildo Eclesiástico of the Catedral de Santiago had been supporting since the middle of the nineteenth century. Vicuña Mackenna, meanwhile, in his book *Páginas de mi diario durante tres años de viaje* proposed as role models Canova sculptures, the church of the Madeleine in Paris, and the Basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls, which he refers to as a “modern church”.<sup>23</sup>

It is not possible fully reconstruct the set of ideas and readings that could have influenced the formulation and articulation of this discourse that judges the colonial artistic tradition as a hindrance to the development of the real painting and sculpture, as well as to the promotion of an enlightened piety. Fundamentally, because there are no known previous investigations about the literature discussing art to which Chileans of the nineteenth century had access or knew. However, after reviewing catalogs in libraries of this period it is possible to suggest a few tentative propositions.

---

<sup>16</sup> GÓNGORA, Mario, “Aspectos de la Ilustración Católica en el pensamiento y la vida eclesiástica chilena (1770-1814)”, en Mario Góngora, *Estudios de Historia de las Ideas y de Historia Social*, Ediciones Universitarias de Valparaíso, Valparaíso, 1980, pp. 127-158, p. 129.

<sup>17</sup> SERRANO, Sol, *¿Qué hacer con Dios en la República? Política y secularización en Chile (1845-1885)*, Santiago, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2008, pp. 39 y 135.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 252-253.

<sup>19</sup> EYZAGUIRRE, José Ignacio Víctor, *Op. Cit.*, tomo I, p. 4.

<sup>20</sup> LASTARRIA, Jose Victorino, *Investigaciones sobre la influencia social de la conquista i del sistema colonial de los españoles en Chile*, Imprenta del siglo, Santiago, 1844, p. 113.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, p. 412.

<sup>22</sup> *Acuerdos*, 8 de noviembre de 1887, Archivo de la Catedral de Santiago (ACS), Santiago de Chile, Libro de actas del Cabildo, n° 14.

<sup>23</sup> VICUÑA MACKENNA, Benjamín, *Páginas de mi diario durante tres años de viaje*, Imprenta del Ferracarril, Santiago, 1856, pp. 238, 242 y 244.

It is unavoidable to consider the possibility that Johann Joachim Winckelmann's writings and points of view could have somehow influenced members of the local elite. Particularly his claim that perfect beauty in sculpture and architecture should be obtained with white marble,<sup>24</sup> his conviction that good taste found its origins in ancient Greece,<sup>25</sup> and finally, his tendency to condemn artworks that are currently studied as Baroque.<sup>26</sup> In the Biblioteca Nacional in Santiago, the catalogue includes the writings of Winckelmann including a 1783 version of his *Remarques sur l'architecture des anciens*, a 1786 version of his *Recueil de différentes pièces sur les arts*. However, there is no evidence that private libraries in Santiago included Winckelmann's work. The truth is that one cannot rule out the possibility that his ideas had contributed to forge the discrediting of colonial art.

Benjamín Vicuña Mackenna's library registers that it owns the book *Opere di Giorgio Vasari*, an 1857 edition by Trieste.<sup>27</sup> The Biblioteca Nacional's catalog shows ownership of two editions of *Le vite de' piu eccellenti pittori, scultori e architetti*, dating from 1841 and 1857 as well as an edition of *Le opere di Giorgio Vasari* published in 1838. These antecedents would suggest that Winckelmann's work was known through recent editions, which would show a renewed interest in his writings in the middle of the nineteenth century. It is possible, therefore, that his ideas about the inferiority of sculptural work in which artists added materials to hide errors would have had some resonance among the Chilean intellectual elite.

The nickname "cobbler" that Vasari used to refer to those relying on these artistic tactics,<sup>28</sup> could be appropriately applied to the Quito artists who by the nature of their work, not only performed their artworks assembling pieces of wood, but also covered them in polychrome and supplied them with natural hair and clothing made of fabric. The Italian author respectfully refers to the tradition of woodcarvings fitting of Christian art; however, he expresses his preference for marble and bronze.<sup>29</sup> This point of view could have influenced the acquisition of European devotional sculpture in those materials to replace the old colonial images in the churches of Santiago, a phenomenon that began in the middle of the nineteenth century and whose most significant example is the altar of the Recoleta Dominicana, which has marble sculpture of Nuestra Señora del Rosario, Santo Domingo y San Francisco.<sup>30</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup> WINCKELMANN, Johann Joachim, *Historia del arte de la antigüedad*, Ediciones Akal, Madrid, 2011, p. 77.

<sup>25</sup> WINCKELMANN, Johann Joachim, *Il bello nell'arte. Scritti sull'arte antica*. Giulio Einaudi Editore, Torino, 1943, p. 9.

<sup>26</sup> WINCKELMANN, Johann Joachim, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 29 y 50.

<sup>27</sup> CRISTI, Mauricio, *Catálogo de la biblioteca i manuscritos de D. Benjamín Vicuña Mackenna*, Imprenta Cervantes, Santiago, 1886, segunda parte, p. 241.

<sup>28</sup> VASARI, Giorgio, *Le vite de' piu eccellenti architetti, pittori, et scultori italiani, da cimabue insino a' tempi nostri*, Firenze, 1550, p. 58.

<sup>29</sup> VASARI, Giorgio, *Le vite de' piu eccellenti architetti, pittori, et scultori italiani, da cimabue insino a' tempi nostri*, Firenze, 1550, p. 70.

<sup>30</sup> El Ferrocarril, 23 de noviembre de 1882, n° 8556. RAMÍREZ, Ramón, O.P., *Los Dominicos en Chile. Breve resumen de los hechos históricos, personajes, etc.*, Santiago, 1976, p. 45. GUZMÁN, Fernando, *Representaciones del Paraíso. Retablos en Chile, siglos XVIII-XIX*, Editorial Universitaria, Santiago, 2009, pp. 123 y 124.

A type of book that was often found in nineteenth-century libraries in Santiago are travelogues, which include ideas about art and architecture that on occasion echo Winckelmann's thinking or that of other authors. One example of these travel books is the *Lettres sur l'Italie*, published in 1788 by the French lawyer Charles Dupaty, which was registered as being part of Mariano Egaña's library catalogue.<sup>31</sup> Dupaty, a French lawyer, recorded with letters his travels throughout Italy during 1785, giving account of a markedly classicist taste that leads him to bemoan the depraved and ridiculous artistic models influencing such figures as Bernini and Borromini.<sup>32</sup> If Dupaty rejected certain features in the sculptures of celebrated artists, Chilean readers of his *Lettres sur l'Italie*, attentive as they reviewed this comment and certain in his authority, should have reacted more sternly against the colonial sculptures crowding the churches of Santiago.

The authors cited above do not devote any special attention to the specific problems of the sacred or devotional art. Therefore, to understand the special concern about the alleged negative effects of colonial art on religious life, it is necessary to analyze other sources. In this context, a particularly influential book must have been Juan Interian de Ayala's *El pintor christiano y erudito*, whose presence in various libraries of Santiago indicates that the ideas therein contained would have been widely diffused locally.<sup>33</sup>

The book includes a catalog of mistakes that are routinely committed when painting and sculpting a sacred image, repeating in the context of the Spanish enlightenment some arguments contained in publications by Molano, Paleotti, Carducho Vicente, and Antonio Palomino, among other authors.<sup>34</sup> The second chapter in Interian de Ayala's book expresses the need for "the rude and ignorant neophytes and some other very bad artists to be prevented from painting or sculpting sacred images. Suggesting that they be authorized to paint "barber shops, taverns, melons, vegetables, cucumbers, pumpkins, and anything that they please provided they do not paint sacred images that having been introduced to foster piety, by the abuse they make of their art, they serve more quickly to ridicule and contempt".<sup>35</sup> The book seemingly itemized all possible characteristics that could enable the condemnation of the majority of colonial art. Considering that, its sculptures and paintings did not

---

<sup>31</sup> SALINAS, Carlos (1982): "La biblioteca de don Mariano Egaña, con especial referencia a sus libros de derecho", *Revista de Estudios Histórico-Jurídicos*, n° 7, pp. 493 y 502.

<sup>32</sup> DUPATY, Charles Marguerite-Jean-Baptiste Mercier (1746-1788), *Lettres sur l'Italie* (1785), Chez Senne libraire de Monseigneur Comte d'Artois, París, 1788, tomo I, p. 215.

<sup>33</sup> Salinas, Carlos (1982): "La biblioteca de don Mariano Egaña, con especial referencia a sus libros de derecho", *Revista de Estudios Histórico-Jurídicos*, n° 7, p. 531. Some editions are housed at the Biblioteca Nacional and the Biblioteca del Convento de la Recoleta Domínica.

<sup>34</sup> Salinas, Carlos (1982): "La biblioteca de don Mariano Egaña, con especial referencia a sus libros de derecho", *Revista de Estudios Histórico-Jurídicos*, n° 7, p. 531. Some editions are housed at the Biblioteca Nacional and the Biblioteca del Convento de la Recoleta Domínica.

<sup>35</sup> INTERIAN DE AYALA, Juan, *El pintor christiano y erudito, ó tratado de los errores que suelen cometerse freqüentemente en pintar, y esculpir las Imágenes Sagradas*, Madrid, 1782, p. 11.

obey the rules of art and therefore offended the dignity of the subjects represented. According to the author, colonial art's ridiculous and despicable conventions were not conducive to devotion.

Undoubtedly, various other books discussing art circulated in Santiago in the middle of the nineteenth century beyond those cited above. However, the selection herein referred besides presenting different genres, allows scholars to work with publications that have for the most part being shown to be part of the city's libraries during this period. Thus, we can securely state that the discourse on the need to regenerate devotional art began to take shape from very specific readings. The ideas promoted by the books of Winckelmann, Vasari, Dupaty e Interian de Ayala, and that of other similar authors, were instrumental in convincing the national elite that the systematic evaluation of seventeenth and eighteenth century paintings and polychrome sculptures, along with impeding the development of good taste, encouraged anachronistic form of devotion.