EXHIBITION REVIEW:
Contested Visions in the Spanish Colonial World

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LACMA's recent display of art from the viceroyalties of Mexico and Peru excels in its ability to please both the casual museum visitor and academics familiar with the field. This is because *Contested Visions in the Spanish Colonial World* conjoins the lure of objects delectable in aesthetic form with the attraction of an exhibition bent on revising canonical assumptions. Exemplary of this phenomenon is the featured Andean *uncu*: woven in the traditional Inca tapestry technique, it features glistening silver thread, a modification never seen before the arrival of the Spanish (Plate 9). The *uncu* is decorated with Spanish heraldic devices and *tocapu*, geometric patterns associated with Inca lineage that have of late presented tantalizing interpretation challenges for colonial art historians. The *uncu* illuminates the growing efforts of art historians to analyze and appreciate how viceregal artisans negotiated disparate techniques, materials, and signifying languages.

Contested Visions eschews the outdated line of colonial inquiry (read: analysis of the Iberian´s role at the expense of indigenous consideration, perpetuating the illusion of a rapid and complete conquest), and instead attempts to reveal the multiplicities and contradictions of the era through its art production. It coalesces thematically as an investigation of the role indigenous peoples played in Spanish America. The visitor is ushered through the art of the Inca and Aztec empires before encountering viceregal works from both New Spain and Peru. The passage from Inca and Aztec galleries into spaces filled with viceregal objects produces the overarching narrative. Carefully orchestrated by curator Ilona Katzew, the organization explores relationships between pre-conquest traditions and post-conquest visual production. The thematic sequence demonstrates that convergence and negotiation were paramount to Spanish viceregal visual culture. This compelling presentation is indebted to the work of previous curators and academics that propelled the appreciation of viceregal pieces well beyond the insipid niche once reserved for Spanish colonial visual culture.

Enter the world of Inca and Aztec art. Immediately, a towering Aztec ceramic sculpture of a man costumed as an Eagle Warrior greets you (Plate 10). The mass and posture of the sculpture, placed on a pedestal and rising high above viewers, produces awe. It also startles in verisimilitude, for conventional notions of pre-conquest art preclude large scale figural representation. *Eagle Warrior* is displayed in juxtaposition to a massive Incan checkered mantle (Plate 11). Positioned together, they inaugurate the voyage into each culture's artistic and religious designs.

Small votive figurines that were used during sacrificial rituals dominate the Inca gallery. The labels for these votive figurines showcase the first instance of canonical re-writing, as the artisans were Chimu, not Inca. The Incas conquered the Chimu coastal tribe in the 1470's and brought Chimu artisans to Cusco as reigning artisans. If the artwork distribution in the gallery evidences Inca art production writ-large, Chimu artistry deserves recognition for its seminal contribution to Inca artistic development. The prominence of Chimu artisans inside the Inca gallery, resultant from their incorporation into the Inca Empire, serves to de-mystify the later conquest of the Inca by the Spanish: both scenarios produce an artistic convergence of "vanquished" and "victor." *Contested Visions* demonstrates that Inca and Spanish visual cultures were both highly influenced by the peoples they conquered.

In an expert maneuver, *Contested Visions* camouflages the shift from pre-conquest galleries into post-conquest ones. Fittingly labeled *Ancient Styles in the New Era*, the first post-conquest gallery remains consistent in design with the Aztec and Inca spaces. As you enter, no conspicuously European materials or modes of production are visible. The forms of artistry are still familiar to pre-conquest empires: Inca textiles and feather works, Aztec stonework, obsidian and silver sculptures. Only upon intimate examination do these objects disclose ties to post-conquest origins.

Material continuity is coupled to symbolic negotiation in this gallery, as the substance of Aztec and Inca art is refashioned towards novel purposes and decorated with new signs imported from Europe. Sixteenth-century artisans in New Spain carved a large stone baptismal font utilizing the same raw material and skill set necessary for pre-conquest sculpture. Visible on the exterior of this font, which was built for the enactment of Catholic

sacraments in Mexico, is pre-conquest sacrificial imagery. The Inca textiles in this gallery, crafted from the same materials and techniques as their pre-conquest siblings, are here embroidered with Christian and Spanish heraldic symbols.

These early colonial works also reveal adaptations in their post-conquest production through the physical effects of disrupted trade. Inca exchange with feather tradesmen in the *selva*, rainforest areas east of the Andes, was severely restricted during the sixteenth century due to conquest battles and civil wars. Inca feather works, which employed brilliant oranges, blues and yellows in the pre-conquest galleries, transition to browns and whites in the post-conquest pieces such as *Man's Tabard* (Plate 12). This phenomenon appears to have eluded feather trade in New Spain, as the exquisite and colorful *Bishop's Feather Work Miter and Infulae*, made in New Spain, stands in marked contrasted to the muted Andean feather works, and is bound to be acknowledged as a viceregal masterpiece (Plate 13). This piece also has an exact sister version, which was gifted during the viceregal era to the Pope in Rome, an act that serves as a testimonial to the fascination Europeans held for "New World" art.

Moving forward, the gallery spaces become progressively lit, and mounting excitement accompanies this evolution. The bulk of the show is organized thematically as opposed to chronologically. These galleries feature a smorgasbord of sixteenth through nineteenth century objects from New Spain and Peru. Mannerist, baroque, neoclassical and native folk-traditions intermingle. Although this organization allows for formal comparison, the curatorial emphasis lies in the exploration of New Spain and Peru´s shared dialectical polemic.

Immense *biombos* steal the show in the second post-conquest gallery: *Conquest and New World Orders*. These skillfully executed works, unique to New Spain, elicit an intimate scrutiny uncommon for objects their size. The *biombos* form was imported from Japan, while the decorative cityscapes and mythological programs were invented in New Spain. As the Americas linked Spanish trade routes between Asia and Europe, New Spain, and especially Mexico City, enjoyed a cosmopolitan ambience. *Biombos* demonstrate the truly international strains that run through Spanish viceregal art. By awarding these folding screens the prominent placement they merit,

Contested Visions positions the Spanish Colonial world as a global center, both economically and culturally.

In another long overdue infusion to the canon of colonial visual culture, caste paintings (*pinturas de casta*) are revitalized as complex and historically specific pieces (Plate 14). Too often these works, which chart mixing between Spaniards, Indians and Blacks in New Spain, are read through twenty-first century conceptions of race, overlooking the complex portrayal of Spanish American tropes, material goods and economy. In order to remedy this, *Contested Visions* displays caste paintings alongside paintings that classify more than people. Thus, we can appreciate the ideological overlap of *Yumbo Indian from Mainas with his Load* with caste paintings. Their proximity illuminates how caste paintings, like this image of a generic Indian type carrying promotional depictions of American fruit and vegetables, were fictionally constructed scenes meant to merchandise the uniquely American.

As one might correctly assume, the myth of the conquest looms large in colonial visual culture. Take for example *Folding Screen with the Conquest of Mexico*, which attempts to justify the conquest by presenting Spanish forces of order and civility conquering an Aztec society plagued with chaos. Across from *Folding Screen with the Conquest of Mexico*, one can observe the European Protestant discussion of the conquest via Theodor de Bry's influential book illustrations of Spanish brutality and insatiable greed in the Americas. Contested Visions also explores how creoles of New Spain wielded art as an ideological tool to foment their emerging sense of nationhood. In the eighteenth-century work *San Hipólito and the Mexican Coat of Arms*, Spanish creoles harnessed the Aztec foundational myth to negotiate their emerging identity as "Mexicans."

The next galleries, *The Devotional Language and the Indian as a Good Christian and Indian Festivals and Sacred Rituals*, couple Spanish visual culture with performance. Religious and civic festivals featuring processions, costumes and traditional dances form the bulk of the subject matter in these galleries. The numerous Virgin veneration paintings that commemorate viceregal religious processions featured in *Contested Visions* attest to the importance of public spectacle in New Spain and Peru. Indians, who were conceived by Iberians as invariably on the verge of idolatry, teetered in visual performance between devout worshippers and dangerous idolaters. In yet

another re-writing of the colonial canon, the scope of religious art is proven to extend beyond indigenous didacticism. Paintings were also instructive for religious devotees (friars and fathers) who sought saintly inspiration for their mundane responsibilities.

In *Contested Visions* the art from each respective viceroyalty is usually placed along separate walls, which fosters simultaneous thematic unison and stylistic comparison. This allows viewers to learn to distinguish the qualities of Mexican and Peruvian works. For example, the perceptive viewer will deduce that elaborate gold leafing can be found almost exclusively on Cusco School works. This sumptuous décor compresses the illusionistic space and renders the Peruvian works surprisingly modern. The sheer quantity of Andean pieces in the show is a notable advance for a field that tends to be Mexico-centric. That said, the diversity of viceregal production within the Peruvian viceroyalty could be further elucidated, as the significant painting production of Lima and Potosi remains overlooked in *Contested Visions*.

Upon entering the final gallery, *Memory Genealogy and Land*, a colonial *quipu* is displayed alongside an educational video. The video documents a yearly ritual in the Andes that honors the *quipus*. One man who hails from a town that still maintains and honors its *quipus*, states in the video: "for us, it [the *quipus*] is everything." And yet he notes that *quipus* can no longer be read; they have become inaccessible yet potent symbols of pre-conquest ancestry. This contemporary conception of the *quipu* raises the question: Did colonial citizens comprehend the Inca or Aztec signs employed in their own colonial visual culture? Had the signs come to embody wholly new meanings?

These questions are important, as Inca and Aztec symbols and mythology are recalled at great lengths in the last gallery. Both Spanish and indigenous inhabitants of the Americas used art as legal evidence to secure and maintain elite privileges, the indigenous often referencing their pre-conquest genealogy to gain post-conquest respect. Large-scale portraits of indigenous, mestizo, and Spanish viceregal subjects conclude the show, objects replete with complex amalgamations that speak to local rituals.

Contested Visions explores a canon that was still in its burgeoning stages, suggesting the potential of a visual culture unbounded by rigid historicizing

processes. Wall labels in the show often leave interpretation open ended, emphasizing where research is yet to be done, and admitting that some things we will never know. The labels avoid the thorny question of the artists' ethnicity, though leading scholars in the field consider the subject in the exhibition companion book.

The impact of the exhibition is visually astonishing and will recruit new admirers to viceregal art production. Although not as groundbreaking in its comparative presentation as it claims to be (think: 1996 *Converging Cultures in the Spanish Colonial World: Art and Identity in Spanish America* at the Brooklyn Museum, and 2006 *Tesoros/Treasures /Tesouros: the Arts in Latin America, 1492–1820* at the Philadelphia Museum of Art), this show attests to LACMA's commendable effort in promoting Latin American art. Curator Ilona Katzew unites objects featured in seminal art historical articles (such as the *Lienzo Tlaxcala* and *the Marriage of Martin de Loyola to Princess Doña Beatriz*) with previously unsung marvels.

Contested Visions of the Spanish Colonial World, building upon a continuum of museum consideration of viceregal art, broadens the canon, or perhaps better said, provides the impetus to deconstruct the canon. It attempts to fracture any monolithic conceptions of colonized and colonizer. And because the exhibit foregrounds cultural negotiation as inherent to societies in flux, it even questions the exceptionalism of Spanish America. It serves as an inspiration for all curators to explore the forces of convergence and negotiation that, although uncommonly prominent in the Spanish colonial world, are endemic to any visual culture.

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