



SOCIAL CONTENT IN THE MEXICAN PLASTIC ARTS OF THE COLONIAL PERIOD

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This paper will give a definition of “Social Content in the Arts” and demonstrate how social content can be determined by investigators. In the examples discussed and analyzed we shall concentrate on painting but also refer to the arts of sculpture and architecture. Dealing only with the major plastic arts, we shall omit any discussion of literature, music, the dance, and the minor plastic arts such as ceramic, metal working, textiles, costume, and furniture, among others. We shall also omit consideration of the corroborating evidence conveyed by archival and other documents.

The social content of the arts comes from the wishes and demands of the patron, the training (*i.e.*, the level of skill) of the artist, and the social role the work of art plays. They all reflect the taste of their times and thus the social ambiente in which the work of art was produced. Social content is conveyed to the beholder explicitly and directly through direct communication in what we can call the iconographic component of the work of art, and implicitly and indirectly through the style of the work of art.

Social content in the plastic arts so defined derives from the wishes and demands of the patron, the skills and training of the artist and reflects the socio-economic level of the patron, the technical level of the artist's training, and the level of taste of the public for whom it is made.

What can be deduced about Colonial Mexican society through a study of its major plastic arts thus can come from the explicit, overt, and direct statement and also the covert, implicit, or indirect information we derive from study of such aspects of the work as style, materials used, size, and even financial resources of the patron.

Social content can be determined directly in the several arts by the statements of meaning conveyed directly to the beholders. In domestic architecture, for instance, this can be conveyed through the use of towers and coats of arms to indicate the titles of nobility of the owners. In religious architecture there is a hierarchy paralleling the clerical hierarchy. The Cathedral of México is the prime cathedral church, seat of the archbishop; the other cathedrals follow, just as the other Colonial schools fell in order of social importance below the university. The parish church is by definition lower in the architectural as well as the religious hierarchy. Mission churches in remote parts

of the country are of simpler and more modest construction and decoration than the great pilgrimage churches. The monastic establishments of wealthy and powerful orders, such as the Jesuits, are larger than those of the smaller orders; parish churches in the great colonial centers are ordinarily larger and more luxurious than those of small country pueblos. Conventional establishments, especially for nuns had their own social stratification —those for Indians, for Mestizos, and for Spaniards, for the rich with a dower fee of 4,000 pesos or the poor, for the ordinary citizen and for the nobility. The very name of the order can conjure up for the student the status of its inhabitants and thus the social position of the community as surely as the coat of arms emblazoned over the doors of city palaces or the battlements and fortified towers of remote estates in the northern cattle country indicate the title of the owner of a noble palace or social status of the hacienda owner. These insignia of rank state the owner to belong to the high social strata closest to the viceregal court; usually they belonged either to the agricultural aristocracy or the mining magnates of the Colony.

Painting in the Baroque period, however, gives us even more clear-cut indications of social content. Secular painting, through most of the colonial period was by and large limited to portraiture and here, through coats of arms and the descriptive text of the labels on the painting, the life, deeds, and social position of the sitter are spelled out in almost painful detail. His position in the secular, religious or military hierarchy defined, dates of birth and death or the time when the portrait was painted are usually included. The setting for the sitter in the portrait merely reinforced this social message. Splendor and richness of costume give indication of profession, trade or occupation through attributes such as clerical garb, regular or secular costume indicating a nun's order, the sword of the nobleman, the books of the attorney, the studio of the writer, and the hacienda setting; all are elements of the explicit social content of Colonial portraiture.

Paintings were made of the various physical types resulting from the inter-marriages of whites, Indians, and Negroes and the various permutations, each with its own name. Again, such paintings explicitly point out the racial mixtures through the use of written descriptions with the commonly used name for the result of each mixture and additionally show typical costumes and occupations of these members of the lower socio-economic classes.

The student of Mexican culture and history, having examined the work of art under consideration in terms of its overt statement, may find answers complete enough to enable him to place the work in its social milieu and thus have no further need of analysis. However, it is quite possible that the direct statement will not

give the required information, that the primary message is not clear enough. In that case he must turn to other methods of dealing with the work of art to decipher the social content. These can deal with the patron (although patronage is either stated directly or is a much clouded and difficult matter to decipher solely from the work of art), the social role of the work in itself, or finally, the social role and status of the artist.

The social role of the work of art in itself can be resolved into two major categories: public and private. By these we mean that the work is displayed in a public context such as a religious painting or sculpture in a church or a public building, a *cabildo*, for instance, or it can appear in a more private context—a portrait from a private collection, the residence of a private person even though a member of the Colonial nobility. There is another way of dividing the material, however, since the division between public and private may be with some justice considered somewhat artificial. Perhaps another distinction might be more useful for our purposes: the distinction between works of art produced in the metropolitan ambiente and those made in the provincial ambiente. The provincial ambiente, in this context, refers to provincial centers, cities and villages, and the artists working in them, but also by extension those working in the capital itself if they are remote from the *avant-garde* tendencies of metropolitan art or removed from the rigorous and specific training demanded of artists working in the highest echelons of courtly art.

The sixteenth century gives us the clearest examples in painting and sculpture of the indirect expression of social content in the plastic arts. The very existence of a large monumental conventual establishment points to its social role the seat of the first missionary groups, the seat of the educational effort aimed at bringing the Indians into the orbit of Europeanized society in the varying degrees the Church and State had decided this should be done. The College of the Holy Cross at Tlatelolco, a liberal arts college established for Indians, played a somewhat specialized role in Colonial life; however, it was below the University in prestige. Equally specialized, the University played a distinct role at the highest levels in terms of education, in terms of students, in terms of relation to the viceregal court and Colonial society, especially in its social aspect. Other Colonial educational institutions fell in ranks below the University in their importance in society.

Architectural decoration, as in the flat two-dimensional sixteenth century facade at Tepoztlan, indicates the greater remove of its sculptor from European antecedents than the fine plasticity closer to European sources of the example of the facade at Acolman.

Paintings show similar differences, afford similar clues, and give similar knowledge about the artists, the patrons, and the public

they were destined for. The early Colonial manuscript paintings with their survival of Pre-Colombian artistic modes are aimed either at native viewers and readers or at Spaniards, most probably either government officials or clerical intellectuals interested in understanding the Indian culture, then on the wane.

Fresco decorations of sixteenth century convento walls, on the other hand, were destined for almost as restricted an audience, the inhabitants of the convento only and their permitted guests, and exhibit closer ties with Europe because of the heavy degree of reliance on illustrations in printed books for inspiration. One does not know for sure who the painters were, but they were clearly closer to European counterparts or at least the European sources than the manuscript painters.

At the same time, in the second half of the sixteenth century, European-born and trained painters began arriving in the New World, bringing with them the art of painting as practiced in Europe. European forms are clearly seen in their style —figural proportions, figures set in landscape with assurance, the use of sophisticated antitheses of light and shade, and the European materials— stretched canvases (lienzos) and oil paint, none used in the acculturated world of the native-born artists to any significant degree that we know of.

The painters arrived from Europe were organized into a guild following European practices and were employed by the highest ranking persons and public institutions in Colonial society. A painting on a stretched canvas is, by its very nature, speaking to us from an assured position in the top strata of this society. The convento fresco, more private than lienzo altarpeices in the same church, is in a somewhat middle position. It is in a European ambiente, but so far as we know, not executed by artists trained in Europe but rather made by skilled copyists from European prints for the more restricted contemplation of cloistered clergy. The Indian manuscript painting was made in a world of anonymous masters working either for themselves or for Spanish clients who certainly did not consider them on the same level as a Simon Pereyngs or a Francisco de Zumaya.

In addition to documentation from historical archives and signatures, traditional methods for making attributions, we can also tell the social position of the artist by his style, by something as discernible as closeness to or remoteness from European modes of painting. This is, in truth, a way of arriving at some aspects of the social content of Colonial painting.

Indirect evidence of the social status of owner and architect and the role played by secular buildings in the Baroque period is the magnitude of the palace: the large size of the plan of the whole and its complexity, the large number, and very indicative of status, the specialization of rooms — a family chapel, for instance, or special-

ized patios for the masters or for service. Sculptural elaboration of the facade, even its very size (height and width fronting the street) and materials (stone in México, stucco and ceramic tile in Puebla) are in contrast to the more humble buildings of adobe. Interestingly enough, the architects of Baroque palaces could sign their work with an inscription, permitted to do so no doubt by a noble patron proud of having his palace designed by a distinguished architect. Lower down in the social hierarchy, such signatures are extremely rare if not non-existent.

The style of the painter in the Baroque period gives important data on the sitter and his ambiente. A portrait by Cabrera was sought after in the highest social circles of the Viceroyalty. In the small country pueblos or even in relatively large country towns painters of much less training, sometimes called folk-artists, were also busy making portraits. The "Mayor of Pátzcuaro" is an example of such a portrait. Somewhat ungainly, unable to place his figure convincingly in space, and not giving us a convincingly three-dimensional human form not complex patterns of light and shade, the artist was clearly a provincial painter, and the style of his painting tells us this. Other suggestions also come from the painting which one would hope could be investigated through documentation. Why, for instance, did these provincial sitters or patrons not employ the services of more expert, sophisticated, and metropolitan painters? Was it because they could not convince the courtly painter of the capital to come to the provincial city or the patron himself could not go to México City for sittings? Was it because the scale of prices in the capital was too high for such provincial officials? Another possibility is that the provincial patron preferred the style of the provincial artist. All these are questions posed, in effect, by the style of the painting aside from the explicit statements in the painting, and to answer them we must turn to the documentary materials of the archive.

Religious painting can also convey social content in a very significant way. Great paintings of such subjects as the "Triumph of the Eucharist" or the "Triumph of the Church", bespeak patronage of a sophisticated type knowledgeable of the highest reaches of the theology of the Church, steeped in the complexities of its iconography.

Popular saints, on the other hand, can also give us parallel insights. Guadalupe, the Mexican Saint, par excellence, born on the standard of the revolutionaries of the War for Independence, was opposed to the Virgen de los Remedios portrayed on the banners of the royal government forces. A study of the various paintings of Guadalupe could show the student the whole range of social position of patron and artist and propinquity to and remoteness from the main streams of official and popular art.

Some of the most unsophisticated and direct examples of Guadalupe

paintings link us to the world of the primitive artist, the untrained painters who even now are making the retablos and ex-votos of Mexican churches. Usually unsophisticated as artists, working in the main for themselves, or at times others, they demonstrate a remoteness from the high styles of the capital today just as they did in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As in the great Baroque portraits, labels are usually used to indicate the stimulus calling forth the picture. A miraculous intervention to save the life of improve the health of the donor whose portrait is usually shown, an equestrian accident in a swollen river, a train wreck, or a miraculous cure for internal infirmities are typical subjects recorded and dated on the labels.

How the donor figure is painted is a far cry from the Baroque portrait in size, in artistic skill and even material: small opposed to large, sheet metal opposed to lienzo, primitive versus sophisticated. One might remark there, as an aside, that the retablo or ex-voto paintings and the provincial paintings are very often as interesting in some ways as the metropolitan state portraits. The "Mayor of Pátzcuaro", for instance, for all of the evidence of the primitive painter, is a powerful and direct statement in which inconsequential details have been suppressed to give a concentrated image of the man. The art of the primitive painter is often extremely linear, lacking soft transitions from light to shadow, and more closely adheres to the two-dimensional plane of the painted surface.

Among the metropolitan painters, on the other hand, we find skill in depicting the three-dimensional form convincingly in the three-dimensional space; their sophisticated and intricate compositions often use patterns of light and shade as integral parts of the design as well as devices for showing depth. The work of Cabrera is a good example of the subsidiary social content to be found in the oeuvre of such painters. His paintings in the Church of Sta. Prisca and Sebastian in Taxco demonstrate in their facility his cosmopolitan training and associations. Their presence in what was one of the most ambitious and complete patterns of architecture, sculpture, painting and minor arts (silver work, embroideries, even furniture) of the Baroque period is a clear demonstration that Borda, the patron of the church, who spared no pains in collecting artists to work for him, must have considered Cabrera the supreme painter of the time. His position is thus verified in Colonial society by the importance of his sitters for portraits and for the importance of his religious paintings with their architectural associations. In this he follows Villalpando and Correa in their suite of paintings in the Sacristy of the Metropolitan Cathedral. The most esteemed artists received the most important and thus from the artist's point of view, the most coveted commissions Colonial society had to offer.

The variety of style to be found in the paintings of Cabrera is possibly a reflection of the nature of his work from a social point of view. We know that the prodigious amount of work attributed to him could hardly have been painted by one man, and we also that he had a shop with assistants to help him with his large commissions and suites of paintings. The social status of Cabrera thus was more than respectable from the point of view of the commissions he received and from the size of the "operation" he headed.

The Baroque painters supported and even proclaimed the power, wealth and opulence of the Baroque Church in Mexico. Baroque sculptors too were called upon to proclaim the Church. One of the most obvious examples is the seminary-monastery church of Tepetzotlan where sculpture ranging from the retablos of the midseventeenth century to the facade of the church are complemented by the Loreto Chapel, the Domestic Chapel and the works of art embellishing them. An interesting contrast with the wealth of works of art from the metropolitan sphere of Colonial life at Tepetzotlan is the parallel wealth of richness in the Rosary Chapel of Santo Domingo, Puebla. Set in the richness of polychromed-stucco sculpture, both proclaim the heights of Colonial stucco workers. The Puebla Rosary Chapel is in its opulence a proclamation of the aims of the Colonial masters. At the same time, it seems to have been the inspiration for artisans, if not artists, operating on a different level of society in the decoration of the chapel of Santa María Tonantzintla. Here the richness of Puebla is transmuted by the folk-artist into something even more overwhelming. The Indian nature of the pueblo of Tonantzintla is apparent in a study of the polychromed-stucco work with the naïveté of forms and coloring and the overall richly plastic drenching of surfaces.

Isolated examples of sculpture, such as the Santos or Bultos of New Mexico with their almost hieratic dignity derived from frontality and even a rigid stiffness reminiscent of archaic Greece or the Egyptian royal icon, show remoteness from the sophisticated and metropolitan work its polychromy over gold or the use of ivory for faces and hands, with its swirls of drapery echoing European masters and again proclaiming the pride, wealth, power and dominance of the Church in the arts.

We can call attention, in closing, to a certain continuation into the nineteenth century of older modes of thought and behavior. Academic paintings and sculpture demonstrate continued dependence upon contemporary European styles such as Classicism or Romanticism but side by side with this an adumbration of the twentieth century in that Mexican subject matter such as the "Torture of Cuauhtemoc" or the "Invention of Pulque" are the subjects. European styles become more and more merely the vehicle, and the latent indigenism of the subject matter has as its fruit the nationalism of the mural masters of the

early decades of this century a national subject matter and a national style.

Velasco stands out as one of the great nineteenth century landscape painters, and yet, in his panoramic views of the Valley of Mexico with its prosperous agriculture or railroad trains crossing trestles in wild gorges, he paints as social content the *Orden y Progreso* of the late nineteenth century.

Boari's post office in Mexico City is one example out of many where we can point out social content in architecture to parallel that in painting and sculpture. The Venetian Gothic exterior, clearly an importation, is an example of the eclecticism dominating Europe and North America at the time; however, the construction of such buildings with their massive use of materials and mechanical devices imported from abroad show clearly the dependence upon things foreign in more fundamental aspects than just the style with which the building is draped. Perhaps the importation of modern technology in the beginning of this century and the end of the last is, in a way, the continuation of a certain colonialism but at the same time a necessary preparation for the flowering of a distinctly Mexican modern architecture in our own time.

The work of art, a worthy object of study in itself, should be used as a primary document for the general historian both for the direct message it carries and for the indirect information one can deduce from it. It should be used, as should all other documents, with the critical analysis and the acumen of the historian.