

Colonial Mural Painting Pilgrimage through the Northern Andes

Murals in colonial churches in Latin America hold hidden stories that have been disregarded for centuries due to their complexity, poor condition, unassuming aspect, and destruction. When I started working on the research of colonial mural work, I realized that there is a lack of sources and information about these types of works in the Northern Andes. This intrigued me because the little information I was able to find revealed to me extraordinary stories of the people that created and shared these spaces. In my pursuit to gather information about this art form I traveled to Ecuador, Peru, and Colombia to find out what mural work was prevalent in those parts, study their style, form, and the relationships between murals throughout these areas. This trip was possible with the support of the 2017 Tinker Summer Research Grant, and the History of Art Department. The main objective of this trip was to find colonial murals at religious institutions, record them in photographic form, and to gather information relevant to their making.

My first stop was Quito, Ecuador; I stayed there three days. I was able to visit about ten churches where I encountered some widespread problems. Murals were covered by elaborate gold retablos like in the church of La Compañía de Jesús (the Society of Jesus), or they were heavily restored like in La Iglesia del Sagrario (Church of the Sanctuary), both made in the eighteenth century. In Quito, I found a push to transform old murals into renewed works of art. While visually pleasing, they took away from the original features. I thought I might not be able to find a mural that would be helpful for my research until I visited the monasteries of Carmen Alto and San Diego both made in the seventeenth century. Carmen Alto had a mural program depicting the life of St. Theresa of Jesus, and in San Diego the life of Christ. Both mural programs

were not in great shape, but they provided various layers of information. Some areas of the murals expose other paintings underneath the narrative mural. Based on what I saw, there is a direct connection between the murals and European prints. I left Quito enthusiastic to see what Cuenca had waiting for me. Here I found similar issues like in Quito: poor restorations, and covered murals. However, I also found exciting examples of mural works that were better conserved, like at the Old Cathedral (Catedral Vieja) made in the sixteenth century. In Cuenca, I realized that I had to let go of my need to look for a specific type of mural. The murals that I found problematic need to be part of my project. Botched restorations are also a part of the history of the murals, and they brought awareness to the challenges in the upkeep of mural works. Three days later, on July 26th I flew to Peru. In Cusco, I found a different style of painting; there is a persistence to fill out all spaces of the wall. I realized that these mural programs are an important part of mural tradition, but their peculiarity would overpower the study of the murals in Ecuador. The material I found in Cusco gave me a point of comparison to understand better the murals I found in Quito and Cuenca.

After two weeks of traveling, I arrived at my final destination Colombia; this was an emotional leg. I am from Colombia, but due to the violence that once pervaded throughout the country, I was never able to travel freely. My first stop was in the city of Popayan, and the similarities with the mural work of Quito was astounding. The church of the Carmelites provided me with an exciting mural example. The unpretentious façade was once ornamented with trompe l'oeil columns and marbled friezes. From Popayan, I took a break from my mural "hunting" and visited Silvia, Cauca, hiked the volcano of Purace, and visited the subterranean tombs of Tierradentro. These places are located inside the indigenous territory of the

Guambiano, Kokonucos, and the Páez. The tombs at Tierradentro had richly painted walls; I was in awe with the colors and styles of these paintings. These pre-conquest paintings reminded me of the prevalence of mural painting across cultures. After many hours of bus and plane rides, I was out into my final venture. I went to the city of Tunja, in the heart of the Boyaca department. This area was inhabited by the Muisca people before the Spanish conquest to make it the center of their empire in the Northern Andes. Tunja received me with well-preserved mural works that differ from the ones I found in Ecuador and Cusco. I was also able to find mural works in private residences like in the house of the town's clerk Don Juan de Vargas, built in the sixteenth century. Some of the colors of this mural were made using pig's blood. When various plagues emerged in the mid-seventeenth century, the ceiling was concealed to prevent possible infection. This concealment allowed for their pristine preservation. During my time in Boyacá I was able to visit nearby small towns in that appear to be frozen in time, colonial towns that preserved beautiful mural work. My final stop was the perfect end of my mural search. The town's church of Turmeque had a mural program painted about three hundred years ago. It was discovered under the white plaster walls of the church in 1988. This mural program was one of the oldest I found on my trip painted in the 1500's. Thanks to their concealment the murals went through a preservation work that did not attempt to renew them but to conserve them.

In the forty days of my journey, I performed an academic pilgrimage that included more than thirty churches. Besides the information collected for my future dissertation work, I realized that I would not have had a successful trip without the kindness of the people I met at every stop. They entrusted me with the study of their cultural heritage. Colonial murals reflect the unique story of each region. Although these countries were part of the indoctrinating efforts of the

Spanish empire, each region was able to hold into some unique elements from their past. Through the study of mural painting, I want to find the details that hold the hidden history of the people that created and coexisted in those religious spaces.