
Un legado hispano: la cultura barroca y su didáctica en América Latina y el Caribe

A Hispanic Legacy: Baroque culture and its didactics in Latin America and the Caribbean

Claudia Adelaida Gil Corredor¹

Rosilé Obret Orphee²

¹Universidad de Ciencias y Artes de Chiapas. México

²Universidad de Guantánamo. Cuba.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9142-1745>

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7726-3242>

Correo electrónico:

adelaida.gil@gmail.com

rosileo@cug.co.cu

Recibido: 14/03/2022

Aceptado: 22/07/2022

Resumen: El presente artículo expone algunas características de la estética que conformó la sociedad sacralizada de las colonias españolas en América. Es una estética didáctica que se originó en la cultura barroca del catolicismo de Contrarreforma del siglo XVII europeo. La intención es presentar el desarrollo que tuvo en la cultura americana una dinámica artística hispana, usada como discurso político para facilitar la cristianización y promover la estetización de la vida cotidiana de los Virreinos españoles hasta convertirse en una cultura nueva que hace parte de la identidad ritual y festiva de numerosos pueblos originarios del continente y también del Caribe.

Palabras clave: Arte; América Latina; Barroco; Caribe; Didáctica; Estética.

Abstract: This article presents some characteristics of the aesthetics that shaped the sacralized society of the Spanish colonies in America. It is a didactic aesthetic that originated in the baroque culture of the Counter-Reformation Catholicism of the European 17th century. The intention is to present the development of a Hispanic artistic dynamic in American culture, used as a political discourse to facilitate Christianization and promote the aestheticization of daily life in the Spanish Viceroyalties until it became a new culture that is part of the ritual and festive identity of numerous native peoples of the continent and also of the Caribbean.

Keywords: Art; Latin America; Baroque; Caribbean; Didactics; Aesthetics.

Introducción

The baroque culture of broad social sectors in Latin America and the Caribbean is a Hispanic heritage that can be observed today in the ritual practices of native and mixed races peoples. These practices have shaped aesthetics particularized by each people as a form of existence observable in ritual and festive actions both in everyday and sacred life.

They are aesthetic expressions that have not been limited to the stylistic features of paintings or sculptures, but have shaped devotional dynamics that cross the daily life.

The Baroque as an epochal concept that originated in the 17th century was characterized by theological, artistic, economic and political changes in most of Europe. These are changes that show the first glimpses of the modern State, based on the accumulation of wealth, the individualization of the subjects and an aesthetics raised by the reformed Catholicism that wanted to remain integrated to the modern European civilizing project.

Since the late sixteenth century, the ecclesiastical feast began to lose importance as a result of the fact that religion had been expelled from the center of the rising mercantile economy. This meant that the aesthetic experience was used by Counter-Reformation Catholicism as a resource that allowed the continuity of what Echeverría (2012) explains as an imperative of modern civilization: the coexistence of productive and unproductive time. To this end, a more effective art was used that configured aesthetic experiences that did not imply the definitive separation between the civil and the ecclesiastical, but allowed them to coexist.

It was an art that brought into play the real and the illusory through theatricalized representations in which ceremonial time flowed with time that was not, or in which the sacred experience also became domestic. The limits between one and the other were dissolved through aesthetic experiences integrated in stagings so brilliant and pompous that they became new or alternative realities. The religious feast became extremely aestheticized, it became deeply ornamental, just as it happened with its rites, its places and its objects. It was so excessive that even the body of the believer was assumed as a baroque scenographic space (Borja, 2012).

The external demonstration of acts and the public expression of feelings became common, based on a rhetoric of a didactic nature that sought to continually move the senses. Thus, the world began to be assumed as a theater in which it was possible to stage a whole network of appearances capable of persuading. The senses had to be moved to such a degree that the boundaries between what was real and what was not were dissolved during the

staging. This helped to shape a whole system of conventions that regulated the narratives and behavior of individuals in this society.

In the case of what happened in the Viceroyalties of Spain in Latin America, this art was one of the main instruments used by the missionaries to transfer the baroque culture to the colonies of these lands. The intention was to reconstruct, to give shape to a European model in a Latin America that was now not only Indian but also with mixed race. A transfer that did not necessarily imply the faithful reproduction of the Baroque model in the new Spanish territory, but rather a possibility for Latin America to reconfigure itself at the same time that Spain was trying to do so. As Edmundo O'Gorman (1970) states, this was a spontaneous project that did not seek to prolong or expand the history of Europe in seventeenth-century Latin America, but rather to resume its history in America.

The Society of Jesus was the one that, since its foundation in 1540 by the Spaniard Ignatius of Loyola, quickly established a complex system of circulation of information that would also become a means of propagation of the Baroque culture through its evangelizing missions in both America and Asia. The Jesuit order, at the service of the papacy with the intention of spreading the Catholic faith, wanted to translate codes that were proper to European culture to a culture that was rebuilding itself after the bloody conquest of the 16th century.

This religious order also helped to promote the new rationality of this period, that of writing. Through the printing press, a new mechanism for understanding and relating to the world was developed, replacing the orality of the Middle Ages. In the 17th century, the official document, the chronicles and any written or visual narrative formed a new order in which the senses became individualized and at the same time became aware of them.

Development

From a comparative approach, the research whose results appear in this article was developed. Ritual and festive practices of native and mixed races peoples of the southwestern and central regions of Mexico were studied, specifically in the state of Puebla

and in the area known as Altos de Chiapas. Some features of the baroque culture in New Granada were also analyzed, particularly in the Province of Tunja in the 17th century.

A qualitative methodology was used to facilitate a comprehensive approach to a cultural phenomenon of human experiences. In its development, elements of historiography and social anthropology were taken into account given the different stages of the research and the characteristics of the object of study. The interpretative analysis was privileged, typical of a methodological design that focuses on emergent and flexible processes, which also allowed the use of techniques and instruments of an explanatory nature, used as means of inquiry and analysis. In turn, the comparative approach, as a method of analysis, allowed an approach to the sources from the contrast of chronological, geographical and social dimensions. It also made it possible to make the problem explicit, interpret the data to discern the influences and verify the hypothesis.

The comparison was used to interpret a phenomenon occurring in distant regions whose similarities do not necessarily imply a relationship, thus facilitating the search for possible causes, as well as the retrospective reconstruction of the object of study. The methodological structure was developed on the basis of three fundamental stages. In the first stage, the thematic field or problem was defined, as well as its context of occurrence and the cases that made it possible to prepare the fieldwork through documentary observation. In the second, fieldwork, data was collected and organized through the use of comparative units. The third consisted of an interpretative and explanatory task based on contrastation, which made it possible to identify cultural patterns and organize the study situation towards an inductive conceptualization, written in a final report.

The main techniques and instruments used in these stages are as follows:

- First stage: Documentary observation through the collection of archives, press, official publications and bibliographic texts.
- Second stage: Fieldwork through the immersion of the researcher in the study community and the possible involvement of the community in the research. The main

instruments were participant observations, in-depth interviews, the collection of material sources (household goods, household goods, tools, sacred art, altars in temples and domestic spaces); also, the collection of cultural sources (ecclesiastical documents, chronicles and memoirs).

- Third stage: Theoretical interpretation and explanation through the elaboration of the final report. In this stage, we resorted to the development of processes of contrasting and validation of the data obtained to confirm the hypothesis; in addition, processes of comparison of sources -mainly primary sources-. Finally, the theoretical analysis, made by means of descriptive-interpretative triangulation through the use of comparative units.

Baroque art became more than a pictorial, sculptural, architectural or literary style. It was mainly a discursive practice of political order linked to the Counter-Reformation, the monarchy and the European aristocracy that survived the economic, cultural and social changes of the emerging capitalism, until it became a concept of the epoch. Based on an art that produced images with a profound realism and suggestive contents, it facilitated the propagation of the values of evangelization defended by the Catholic Church.

The emphasis on venerating images, which was promoted both in Latin America and in Europe, defended that their worship was not done to them in themselves, as criticized by the Protestant reformers, but to the very thing they represented. These criteria favored the rhetorical character in the treatment of the image from the development of refined pictorial and sculptural techniques focused on the intention of giving form. This criterion refers to an art called baroque in allusion to its meaning of producing forms.

In the particular case of what happened in a large part of the American continent, it could be seen that the effort to generate this and that form facilitated the development of particularized baroque forms in various sectors of today's Latin America. And the fact is that this eagerness to give form to life promoted, since the 17th century, cultural practices energized by an impetus of continuous transfiguration.

Thus, as with baroque art forms that appear to be unfinished or under permanent construction, Latin America's baroque cultural practices unfold under a seemingly perennial rhythm. These are the same effects evident in most seventeenth-century paintings, sculptures and architectural arrangements in which compositional spaces are undulating and pompous, simulating an infinite expansion. Real human actions and emotions are then portrayed but exalted through theatricalized gestures and mimics in the middle of atmospheres through which time passes without stopping.

In the painting of figure 1, made by the Sevillian Diego Velázquez in 1630, we can observe the staging of this aesthetic from which a whole feeling of the time was configured. Entitled "Joseph's Tunic", the scene portrays the moment in which Jacob receives the news from his sons that Joseph, his favorite son, had died after being attacked by wolves. This is a story found in Genesis 37, which describes the deception that Joseph's brothers present to their father to convince him of his death and thus hide the fact that in reality they had sold him as a slave to some Egyptian merchants to get rid of him. The deception was endorsed with Joseph's tunic and shirt bloodied by themselves with the blood of a lamb.

Source: <https://www.wga.hu/html/v/velazque/02/0213vela.html>



Diego Velázquez, The Tunic of Joseph, 1629-1630, oil on painting, 223 x 250 cm, El Escorial, Monasterio de San Lorenzo,

In this baroque version by Velázquez of the biblical story, we can perceive the intention of the movement of Jacob's body as he rises from his chair, evidently moved by the story of his sons. His feet, carefully portrayed, contain the strength of that bodily impulse while the gesture of his outstretched arms reminds us of the father's grief and impotence. In front of him a bloody evidence. The tunic and shirt of his beloved son become a sign of a fateful moment that in turn vividly shows the central situation of the whole story: a deception.

It is a lie that wants to appear to be the truth through its snapshot. The tragedy is represented in the theatricalized gestures of the characters, who, through gestures and grimaces delicately painted by the Sevillian, convince not only the father but also the possible spectator of the painting. Joseph, the protagonist, although absent, presents himself to us through the imprint of his death, and thus his own existence is left in suspense.

The dynamic and agile character of the situation is achieved through the staging of the reactions to a surprise. Through the total mastery of baroque techniques, Velázquez exposes a material reality (fabrics, ceramics, walls, carpets, cobblestones or any other object) that gives veracity to the situation portrayed. He also applies features of formal and three-dimensional indefinición in which some characters merge into the gloom of the room to seem that they are secondary because they are sketched (two young people are perceived self-absorbed in the background diluted as shadows that gesticulate). The painting is then presented to us with unfinished features to remind us that it can continue to take shape.

The figures fit perfectly in the space of the composition at the same time that the vanishing perspective, marked in the checkerboard of the floor, defines the point from which the spectator can become an eyewitness observing what is happening there. It is a perspective that in turn is relativized through an open threshold on the left side of the painting in which an infinite landscape becomes visible. Thus, the atmosphere of the actions and the narration is configured within an inhabitable space that appears before our eyes as an invitation to walk through it and feel the air between the figures.

This is a painting of large dimensions in which the bodies are portrayed in real size. Thus, for example, in the semi-nude characters with a delicate pictorial treatment on their skins,

we are touched by their realism. The light source that only illuminates them touches them at the side of their torsos so that we perceive their volume and thus highlight their gestures of theatricalized complicity. Their large format helps to create a credible image in which "Velázquez does not wink with his incredulous reflection on the apparent truth, even doubly deceptive (as image and as situation)" (Marías, 2005, p. 64). In front of them and to one side of Jacob, a small dog, who seems oblivious to human actions, announces with his barking that everything is a fiction turned into reality.

Narratives made with a baroque structure that consists of putting reality and illusion in suspense to configure a third reality in which aesthetics guarantees that the experience materializes. This was based on the certainty that in this society the painted stories were part of the oral tradition, in such a way that the understanding of the situation was complete. Baroque society is therefore deeply narrative, to such a degree that life itself becomes a story that subjects construct from their acts and bodily dispositions to be told or interpreted by others as well as by themselves.

From the origins of baroque culture in the seventeenth century, a new model of the human being emerged, that of the individual as a builder of himself. Gracián, in his *Manual Oracle and Art of Prudence* written in 1647 says, "Do not surrender to vulgar humor. A great man is the one who never submits himself to strange impressions. It is a lesson of warning to reflect on oneself: to know one's present disposition and to prevent it, and even to lean to the other extreme in order to find, between the natural and the art, the faithful of synderesis" (2020, p. 42). In constructing himself, the baroque individual had to control or direct his actions in such a way that his behavior would lead him to a self-realization consistent with the needs of the rising economy.

This desire for self-realization favored the narrative character of this society and was linked to the intention to sacralize it. Through the continuous deployment of symbols and codes in temples, neighborhoods or homes -as well as in the body or behaviors of devotees- baroque culture was developed as a deeply aestheticized epochal mentality. The mechanism of its

aestheticization and its didactic dynamics became present mainly in ritual actions, which were not exclusive to the festive experience but were part of everyday life.

This character capable of aestheticizing everyday life had a particular development in Latin America since the colonial period. Since then, life was ritualized through religion and the instrument that made it possible was found in an art in which reality merged with the imaginative experience, that of staging. From then on, the script, the staging and the drama invaded both festive and routine life with its own symbols that are no longer identical to those that came from Europe. They are not simply a mixture between the Hispanic and the pre-Hispanic of America, they are a third culture: that of the Latin American baroque.

The European legacy allowed the creation of a new culture, the same ones that the native peoples used to reinvent themselves and thus manage to rebuild themselves in the face of the threat of disappearing. New narratives are born in singular scenarios through a mechanism borrowed from the conquerors themselves, that of the theatricalization of life. They are theatricalizations that can be said to be part of plural modernities, as Robin Blackburn calls them, to refer to the constitutive principles of modernity through the consideration that it does not necessarily coincide in time and space with capitalism. (2015, p. 189).

Many of these devotional narratives of baroque order are visible in different regions of today's Latin America and also the Caribbean through an aesthetic that was particularized by its peoples. Expressed in pilgrimages, processions, festivities, carnivals, offerings of petition or thanksgiving, as well as in religious songs and prayers. Also in sculptures, paintings and in the architecture of diverse temples, as well as in prayers of offering or healing in domestic and personal altars.

Images, saints, virgins and much of the original iconography of Counter-Reformation Catholicism acquired unique features, as did the rituals that developed around them. Ruz mentions in this regard that:

Undoubtedly peculiar saints who -after having overcome the numerous obstacles that the Holy Congregation of Rites posed in order to ascend to the altars- came to know in the Indian villages a suitability that Rome did not imagine even in the most critical moments of the development of the cult of the saints during the Counter-Reformation, and devils whose characterization, although anchored in medieval conceptions, often overflowed the already broad frameworks that characterized the demonology of that time. (2006, p. 26).

Through a network of codes particularized in each region of the continent, the rites of baroque origin have shaped symbolic actions that order communities by generating meanings that give stability to life. They are symbolic systems of installation of a home as mentioned by Byung-Chul Han (2020) when specifying that rituals generate a durability of time through the symbolic perception they provoke. Rituals stabilize the community, as they become perceptible processes of incorporation and staging. He says that, "rituals generate an embodied knowledge and a corporeal memory, an embodied identity, a corporeal rapport. The ritual community is an embodiment (p. 15).

Source: Juan Darío Padilla.



Totike procession, Venustiano Carranza, Chiapas, Mexico, 2019..

Figure 2 shows a moment of the pilgrimage that year after year a native people of Mexico, the Totikes, perform in the area called Llanos de Chiapas. They are a Mayan-speaking people who each year climb some of the hills that surround their town, which they call

"water volcanoes" or "fire volcanoes". During the walk, different offerings are made while a group of musicians sing and play violins, drums and small flutes. Men carry banners and a cross-adorned with a woven crown of flowers. Between continuous prayers for six hours, they climb to the top of the place to share food, kneel and keep the litany of their prayers amidst incense. The staging is pompous, gestural and rich in corporal and plastic expressions. And just like them, the baroque expressions in different areas of Latin America and the Caribbean are deployed to shape identities that guarantee to make the world a home, as mentioned by Byung-Chul Han.

Conclusions

Initially, the didactic character of the baroque strategy consisted in the organization of a set of cultural means that directed the behavior of the subjects in order to integrate them into the social system. Gradually it became a political strategy that, in the case of the American peoples, has been used to continually reconfigure the celebration of life.

The strength and complexity acquired during centuries of expression, adaptation and devotional transformation associated with a baroque aesthetic rich in expressions has led a broad sector of Latin American and Caribbean peoples to integrate expressions of their art to a festive and ceremonial rituality that is proper to them. Thus, their sacred and consecration actions have become a cultural strength that occupies the day to day of their actions and allows them to erect a particular place to become Latin American or Caribbean peoples.

The ritual scenes expressed in the current religious rituality of these areas, evidence the spiritual passages through which the offerings go through to configure a singular aesthetic identity with a deep ceremonial and semantic richness that show their capacity to subjectivize themselves in the experiences of faith as a product of their own history.

It is considered necessary to increase the studies of the diverse Latin American and Caribbean baroque expressions with a comparative analysis perspective that allows to deepen and understand more clearly what their own culture is and the function it fulfills in their daily life and in their collective social actions. It is recommended that the studies can

assume an interdisciplinary perspective, in such a way that the directly artistic perspective can be implemented as an instrument that enriches their knowledge.

Bibliographic References

- Blackburn, R. (2015). Bolívar Echeverría. Modernidad y Resistencias. *El Barroco colonial como modernidad alternativa* (págs. 189-217). México D.F.: Era.
- Borja, J. (2012). *Pintura y cultura barroca en la Nueva Granada. Los discursos sobre el cuerpo*. Bogotá: Fundación Gilberto Alzate Avendaño.
- Echeverría, B. (2012). *La Modernidad de lo Barroco*. México: Era.
- Gracián, B. (2020). *Oráculo manual y arte de prudencia*. Madrid.
- Han, B.C. (2020). *La desaparición de los rituales*. Barcelona: Herder.
- Marías, F. (2005). *Velázquez*. Madrid: Arlanza.
- O'Gorman, E. (1970). *Meditaciones sobre el criollismo*. México: Actas AML.
- Ruz, M. (2006). *De la mano de lo sacro. Santos y demonios en el mundo maya*. Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México.