

Transcending the Cloistered Convent: An Examination of the Role of Secular Mural Paintings in El Carmen de la Asunción in Cuenca, Ecuador

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The architecture of the cloistered convent had one main objective: to separate. The walls of the convent were intended to separate the religious, sacred lives of the nuns inside from the secular, profane world outside. Why, then, do we see eighty vibrant and unique depictions of secular life in the mural paintings of El Carmen de la Asunción, a cloistered convent in Cuenca, Ecuador (Figure 1)? Why are these late-eighteenth-century secular images on the walls of an ante-refectory and refectory? What is their meaning and role in the secluded communal dining space? This article will address all of these questions by examining the temporal and spatial contexts of the paintings. It will be asserted that the nuns circumvented the rigidity of the fortress-like structure of the convent, manipulating its internal space to conform to the lifestyle they created, which was constantly engaged in an interaction with the outside community. The aim of this article is to move beyond what past scholars have done in contextualizing the relevance of the murals and their iconography within mid- to late-eighteenth-century Cuenca and to examine how this context may have affected the refectory space and nuns, themselves, within the overall architectural program of two colonial, Cuencan convents.

The Bourbon Reforms and Cuenca

To understand how the murals played an active role in manipulating the internal sphere of the cloistered nuns, it is first necessary to examine what was happening outside the convent's walls and how the iconography of the murals engaged the secular world. The refectory mural paintings

of El Carmen were completed in 1801, placing them at the end of a century characterized by many complex political, social, and religious changes in Latin America.¹ The eighteenth century began with the Bourbon ascendancy to the Spanish crown and the end of Habsburg reign in Spain. With the advent of this new monarchy came many changes in administration in Latin America intended to tighten Spanish control over the viceroyalties through the Bourbon reforms, which intensified in the mid-eighteenth century under Charles III. The preceding Habsburg monarchy was in power during the entire existence of the New World colonies until the death of Charles II in 1700 and set a long precedent of an administration that could be circumvented or altogether ignored by its colonial subjects.² Some scholars, therefore, characterize the Bourbon reforms as a "second conquest" in Latin America because the new demanding standards of Bourbon reign stood in striking contrast to its more lenient predecessor.³ Throughout the Spanish colonies, the Bourbons systematically favored peninsular Spaniards over creoles in administrative positions, thereby attempting to establish stronger ties with the mother country. This onset of replacements and reduced creole power and privileges frustrated local sensitivities.⁴

Local, Cuencan political sentiments toward the Bourbon reforms parallel the overall effects felt by the creoles throughout the viceroyalties. A city of around 30,000 to 40,000 inhabitants (comprised of Spanish, creole, *mestizo*, and indigenous peoples), Cuenca's economy revolved around agriculture.⁵ As was characteristic of the rest of the Audiencia

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¹ Juan Martínez Borrero, Juan Cordero Ñíguez, and Carmen Ugalde de Valdivieso, *De lo divino y lo profano: arte Cuencano de los siglos XVIII y XIX* (Cuenca, EC: Ediciones del Banco Central del Ecuador, 1997), 62.

² Kathryn Burns, *Colonial Habits: Convents and the Spiritual Economy of Cuzco, Peru* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 167.

³ *Ibid.* As Kenneth Andrien explains in his article, it is difficult to make a blanket characterization of the Bourbon Reforms throughout Latin America given the unique situation of each region. Douglas Washburn

addresses the political situation of the creole elite throughout the eighteenth century in his dissertation and illustrates that the specific situation of the Audiencia of Quito was indeed similar to what can be described as a "second conquest." See Kenneth J. Andrien, "The Politics of Reform in Spain's Atlantic Empire during the Late Bourbon Period: The Visita of José García de León y Pizarro in Quito," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 41, no. 4 (November 2009): 643; and Douglas Alan Washburn, "The Bourbon Reforms: A Social and Economic History of the Audiencia of Quito, 1760-1809" (PhD diss., University of Texas, Austin, 1984).

⁴ Burns, *Colonial Habits*, 168.

⁵ Juan Martínez Borrero, *Pintura popular del Carmen: identidad y cultura en el siglo XVIII* (Quito, EC: Centro Interamericano de Artesanías y Artes Populares, 1983), 17-18. The estimated population is based upon figures provided by contemporaries. It must be understood that their numbers were not always correct and that the figures provided are approximate.

of Quito, the Cuencan elite had consolidated their power in the local economic and political spheres.⁶ It was this consolidated local power that was the object of change for the Bourbons. A contemporary describes the Cuencan creoles as bellicose and disobedient of authority, characteristics that can help explain the polarization of creoles and Spaniards at the root of the Bourbon reforms.⁷

In addition to the political and administrative changes issued by the Bourbon reforms, the Church and clergy in both Spain and its viceroyalties also came under scrutiny. The Bourbon reforms sought to curtail the growth of the Church, especially once Charles III came to power in 1759, because the Church was seen as having too much political and economic power and as an obstacle to increasing agricultural production and industry.⁸ One example of such reduction in power was the expulsion of the Jesuits from the New World in 1767. This was an act that had great resonance throughout the religious community of the Spanish colonies due to the general association of the Jesuits with the triumph of Catholicism throughout the world, as well as with their great academic and economic influence throughout Latin America.⁹ It was not until twenty years after this significant act that the religious reforms reached Cuenca, manifested in the creation of a Cuencan diocese in 1787. Previously under the bishop of Quito, which was distant enough to allow relative freedom, the new diocese called for stricter control over Cuencan convents.¹⁰

The Murals of Cuenca during the Bourbon Reforms

It was during this period of political, social, and religious change and discontent in Cuenca that the mural paintings in the refectory of El Carmen were conceived. During this same century Cuencan mural production developed with images and iconography reflecting increasingly local colonial pictorial expressions. This was a slow change beginning with the convent of La Concepción around 1745 and culminating with El Carmen, where the awareness of a local identity and its relation to the Bourbon reforms was ultimately established. This development is apparent in a comparison of the figural images of La Concepción with those in the secular scenes of El Carmen.

The figural images of La Concepción depict saints of devotion, religious but often not biblical figures that assume a freer character from the perspective of the dogma and to whom great reverence is shown.¹¹ Two of the figures represented are Saint Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the

Society of Jesus, and Saint Francis Xavier, Ignatius's student and co-founder of the Jesuits. The saint images remain rigidly religious with no narrative or action to distract from the great acts and faith of the Catholic figures. In the image of Saint Ignatius, neither flamboyant dress nor over-active stance diverts attention from the viewer's focus on the motionless saint gazing piously toward the heavens. Ignatius is more prominent since his dark figure projects forward against the subtle landscape in the background of the painting, rendered in a reserved overall style with neutral tones, simple straight lines, and basic forms, ensuring that no extravagant painterly techniques distract from the religious significance of the painting.

Considering the influence of the Jesuits in Cuenca, where they led a school and had considerable economic importance, the inclusion of Saint Ignatius in this mural painting around the time of the Jesuits' expulsion is surely no coincidence. Integrated within a rigidly religious program, the image of the Jesuit saint subtly relates to the religious changes facilitated by the Bourbon reforms happening outside the convent walls. That these images connect with the outside world anticipates some of the more forthright, though stylistically different, worldly connections that flourish in the secular scenes of El Carmen years later.

Although the mural paintings in the refectory of El Carmen are not the only images throughout the convent, the refectory is the only room that breaks free of religious rigidity and portrays secular scenes, something that distinguishes it from La Concepción.¹² The eighty individual scenes located along the border on the upper edge of the wall are remarkable as secular illustrations that most transparently refer to the secular community by reflecting true colonial life around Cuenca with actual fruits, vegetables, animals, and activities witnessed and interacted within day-to-day life in settings such as the hacienda, a fundamental institution in the Cuencan agricultural economy and society.¹³ Departing dramatically from the saints of La Concepción, each scene depicts a clear narrative, often with numerous figures engaged in a particular activity. Equally as important as the figures themselves is the environment in which they are illustrated. The trees, fruits, and architecture are important pictorial features that qualify the actions of their human counterparts and place the figures specifically within Ecuador. The colors are vibrant, the lines are flowing, there is little negative space, and shapes are organic, presenting a free and unrestrained style. No hint of Catholic spirituality or pious activity is included within the

⁶ Martínez Borrero, *Pintura popular del Carmen*, 23; Martínez Borrero, Cordero Iñiguez, and Ugalde de Valdivieso, *De lo divino*, 75.

⁷ Martínez Borrero, *Pintura popular del Carmen*, 18-19. This characterization of the creoles is rather typical of cities all over the Spanish colonies, not just Cuenca.

⁸ Burns, *Colonial Habits*, 159; Evelyn Nimmo, "The Concepción Convent of Cuenca, Ecuador: Examining Gender, Class, and Economy in a Latin American Convent" (master's thesis, Simon Fraser University, 2003), 41.

⁹ Burns, *Colonial Habits*, 166; Martínez Borrero, Cordero Iñiguez, and Ugalde de Valdivieso, *De lo divino*, 56.

¹⁰ Nimmo, "Concepción Convent of Cuenca," 42-43.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 70, 64.

¹² Martínez Borrero, *Pintura popular del Carmen*, 141, 144.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 138, 151, 237.

border. Among these independent scenes are two gentlemen near a ruined arch and a group of people slaughtering pigs.

These two pastoral scenes move beyond referring to the physical world outside the convent walls by also referring to the social realm. The scene of the group of people skinning pigs illustrates each individual hard at work on a specific, labor-intensive task (Figure 2). Its angled composition, with the first step in the skinning process at the top left and the last at the bottom right, reinforces the importance of completing each step. This attention to the streamlined process focuses on the individuals who would have been expected to participate in such an activity: the lower racial-economic classes of Indians or *mestizos*, their status further detailed through their bare feet, simple hats, and open collars. Meanwhile, the two gentlemen crossing near a ruined arch depicts them riding at leisure (Figure 3). The curve of the ruined arch mimics the hill curve of the path on which the horses trot out of the scene, further emphasizing the prancing gaiety of free time, a luxury only available to creoles or peninsular Spaniards, thus indicating the figures' probable racial-economic status. The two scenes present dichotomies of work versus playtime, the straight angled line of workers versus the bouncing motion of the horses' gait, as well as the simple work attire of the laborers versus the stylish coats, breeches, and boots of the riders. They thus pose as striking contrasts that emphasize the lives and social roles of the creole or peninsular Spaniard and the *mestizo* or Indian. With these two scenes, clear and distinct social stratifications and roles were reaffirmed during a period of great reform when the validity of colonial status quo was being disrupted by peninsular intervention.¹⁴ The images simultaneously reaffirm the status quo of the local Cuenca society and protest loss of local interests.¹⁵ In this way, the painters of the eighty pastoral scenes of El Carmen uniquely step away from religious subject matter to engage in imagery of social conditions outside the convent walls.

As has been illustrated, the Jesuit saints and genre scenes of colonial life express a voiceless engagement with the Bourbon religious, political, and social changes. If the clear objective of conventual vows and architectural space is to prevent an engagement with the outside world, why would these images bring the outside into the convent? The convent's role in and interaction with colonial society spread far beyond the spiritual.

¹⁴ Ibid., 91-92, 236-237.

¹⁵ Ibid., 91-92, 240.

¹⁶ Asunción Lavrin, "Female Religious," in *Cities and Society in Colonial Latin America*, ed. Louisa Schell Hoberman and Susan Migden Socolow (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1986), 166.

¹⁷ Burns, *Colonial Habits*, 105. Also see Lavrin, "Female Religious," 174.

¹⁸ Lavrin, "Female Religious," 182; Nimmo, "Concepción Convent of Cuenca," 13.

¹⁹ Nimmo, "Concepción Convent of Cuenca," 13; Burns, *Colonial Habits*,

The Convent in Colonial Society

Despite the mandated enclosure and complete physical retreat of religious women, the nuns were not isolated from their world and their times.¹⁶ The *locutorio*, a parlor in front of the cloister, was used by the nuns to receive guests such as relatives, friends, confessors, and business agents. The nuns used the *locutorios* quite regularly to a point at which, as historian Kathryn Burns states, they "became heavily trafficked sites in the city's center," allowing the nuns to gain a large degree of access to their urban environment.¹⁷ Through interactions in the *locutorio*, nuns were able to remain in the cloistered convent yet interact and bond with the city and community on complex economic and social levels beyond the spiritual level.

The economic relationship built in the *locutorio* between the nuns and the city in which they were placed was an essential point of interaction. Convents functioned as both powerful financial institutions and landholders in the colonial economy.¹⁸ By the seventeenth century, convents established many sources of income, such as dowries and charitable donations, which they loaned to the community as one of the primary creditors of colonial cities.¹⁹ As landholders the nuns leased or rented properties, occasionally arranging to sell the surplus produced on their estates.²⁰ Through many complex, intertwined economic affairs, the nuns—as creditors and landladies—partook of economic cycles in their areas, having a direct impact on the development of the city and linking them with secular society.²¹

The economic role of the convent illustrates an external, direct interaction with the world outside the convent walls. In contrast, the social interface between the nuns and the secular community took place internally, within the conventual confines. The nuns simultaneously reinforced and upheld the social order by maintaining the status quo within their cloistered communities. First, they enforced strict entrance policies in which professing women had to be of perfect Spanish ancestry, born in wedlock, and able to pay the required dowry.²² By examining who was allowed to profess, it becomes clear that the convents were elitist institutions in which the relationships of race and ethnicity prevalent in colonial society were recreated.²³ Once professed, hierarchical exclusion continued through separation

137, 143; Lavrin, "Female Religious," 181.

²⁰ Burns, *Colonial Habits*, 143-44.

²¹ Nimmo, "Concepción Convent of Cuenca," 16; Lavrin, "Female Religious," 179, 183.

²² Lavrin, "Female Religious," 176, 178. The nuns, their protégées or pupils, and upper class women who retired to convents belonged to the top layer of society composed of descendants of Spanish settlers or creole offspring mainly from families of bureaucrats, wealthy merchants and landowners. In some cases, however, *mestizas* and poorer women were allowed to profess.

²³ Nimmo, "Concepción Convent of Cuenca," 17.

based on the color of the nuns' veils. Women who wore the black veil were creole or Spanish nuns of superior racial and financial standing who could afford their own private cells, were allowed to vote on convent affairs, and did not have to perform menial tasks within the convent.²⁴ Separated not only by race but also by money, the women of the white veil were less wealthy and potentially of mixed blood. They could not afford the full dowry that bought the prestigious position of the black veil and had to take jobs around the convent such as gardener, baker, etc.²⁵ Although separated from society by the nearly impenetrable architecture of the convent, we have seen that the convent directly reflected and recreated the divisions of class and race rigidly observed in the colonial city.

With an understanding of the colonial convent's economic and social ties to the outside world, it becomes clearer why the uniquely secular images of colonial traditions were executed in a cloistered convent. The images would have visually reinforced the social and economic relationships the nuns forged with Cuenca. The portrayal of largely agricultural subject matter in the colonial scenes, for example, in addition to the depictions of local flora and fauna, established a connection to the largely agricultural based Cuencan economy. Meanwhile, the portrayal of strict social stratifications in the traditional border scenes reflects the status upheld by the nuns in their strict entrance policies and separation of the black versus white veils. The murals take on a vital role for the nuns in their constant engagement with the city by bringing into the convent the outside society and economy at a time when the Bourbon reforms of the secular world were beginning to destroy the conventual life they had created. The religious reforms of the Bourbons curtailed the power of the Church and convent and cut their economic power while the socially privileged creole nuns were witnessing the systematic replacement of their fellow creoles by peninsular Spaniards. The mural paintings uphold what the nuns knew, experienced, and wanted to maintain in their relationship with the secular community.

Implications in Architectural Space

One question remains to be addressed: how do the images manipulate the refectory as an architectural space? The refectory was used as a communal dining area, suggesting perhaps that the agricultural iconography could be related to the consumption of agricultural products. Unfortunately, there is little scholarship that addresses the way in which the nuns engaged with the refectory space.²⁶ For this reason, one cannot answer with certainty why these images are employed

in the refectory rather than any other room in the convent. The answer could simply be found in the fact that this was the only communal room in the convent with access restricted to the nuns. Although the *locutorio* and attached church were accessible to all of the nuns, as opposed to the private living quarters of the cloister, lay people were also allowed in these spaces, thus negating the necessity to bring in the outside world. The refectory, on the other hand, was the only enclosed communal space that was not directly touched by the secular world. The communal identity of the nuns and their connection and interaction with the outside world was therefore manifested in this artistic space as a reaffirmation of that connection. Although the walls prevent the penetration of the outside, this paper suggests that the paintings on the walls override architectural intention and that the imagery is a connection that allows the nuns to circumvent their vows in a constant engagement of the secular.²⁷

Although we do not know with confidence the exact interaction of the nuns with the refectory space, if the connection between the nuns and the external associations of the mural iconography is considered, it becomes clear that the paintings take on an important role in moderating the process of recreating and reflecting colonial Cuenca within the convent. The physical and ideological outside world is brought inside with the Jesuit saints, two-headed eagle, local flora and fauna, and scenes of traditional colonial life. The mural paintings, therefore, create a permeable space for the nuns in what is supposed to be an impermeable architectural complex. The strict boundaries in La Concepción and El Carmen between outside and inside, private and public, sacred and profane, ecclesiastic and secular are all blurred. Within the refectory, there is no longer a complete physical retreat from the outside world. It has been transformed by the mural paintings. With these mural paintings, the nuns do not have to renounce their vows or break down the walls of the convent in order to strengthen and maintain their relationship with the rapidly changing Bourbon world.

Concluding Remarks

As illustrated by the documented interactions with the outside world in the *locutorio* as well as social hierarchies within the convents, the nuns' day-to-day activities overcame the architectural restrictions. The paintings reinforced the objective of the nuns in their manipulation of the internal space and conformed to the lifestyle they created. What is unique about the mural paintings in importing the outside world as compared to the *locutorio* is that the iconography documents an interaction with social, economic, political

²⁴ Ibid., 18-19.

²⁵ Ibid., 19.

²⁶ I could not find specific information about how the nuns interacted in the refectory space such as whether they were allowed to talk, who would have dined in this area, how their seating arrangements were organized, etc.

²⁷ Knowing how the nuns interacted in this space would more fully support this conjecture. If they sat according to their social position, highlighted by the color of the veil, this would be a physical performance and recreation of an internal manifestation of the outside world. This would also be the case if only the white veil nuns ate communally while the black veil nuns ate in their private suites among their recreated households.

and religious life at a specific moment in history. That particular moment was characterized by changes instituted by the Bourbons, changes in which the convents had a vested interest. By creating within the refectory a permeable space in which the outside was brought inside, the mural paintings afforded the nuns a certain degree of control. The unsettling changes of the secular world were brought within the safe, understandable, and controllable jurisdiction of the nuns. They could express their potential discontent with

and connection to the Bourbon reforms, gaining a sense of agency that allowed them to express their opinions in an environment over which they had complete power and to reaffirm their identity with the outside world as influential creoles, creditors, and landholders. The mural paintings decorate the refectory walls, subvert the architecture of the convent, and recreate the outside world through the minds and imaginations of the nuns.

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Figure 1. General view of the refectory in the convent of El Carmen de la Asunción in Cuenca, Ecuador. Photo credit: Dr. Juan Martínez Borrero, Profesor de la Universidad de Cuenca, Ecuador.



Figure 2. Artist unknown, *The killing of the pig*, mural painting, refectory of El Carmen de la Asunción. Photo credit: Dr. Juan Martínez Borrero, Profesor de la Universidad de Cuenca, Ecuador.



Figure 3. Artist unknown, *Two men crossing near a ruined arch*, mural painting, refectory of El Carmen de la Asunción. Photo credit: Dr. Juan Martínez Borrero, Profesor de la Universidad de Cuenca, Ecuador.