

# The Jesuits in SPANISH AMERICA A Legacy of Art and Architecture

## Latin American Painting

Images and architecture have been at the core of colonial Latin America since the earliest years of the conquest. Even the most rudimentary churches needed religious pictures. They were so important to the business of conversion that the Spanish Laws of Burgos of 1512-13 decreed that colonial landowners had to provide the indigenous communities on their property not only with a church and a bell, but also with "pictures of Our Lady." Missionaries and colonists alike believed that images could work miracles, whether by converting Amerindians or protecting settlers. This enthusiasm for pictures has little to do with "art" in the Renaissance and modern sense, but relates instead to the medieval European belief that holy images possessed the presence of their subject. A venerated holy image of the Virgin Mary was not just a portrait of the saint but also an extension of her being. When copies were made of that image, this replication extended her presence infinitely.

—Carolina Alexander Bailey  
Art of Colonial Latin America (Penguin Press, 2005)

The Society of Jesus arrived in America almost a century after its discovery and conquest by Europeans. By that time other religious congregations, such as the Franciscans, Dominicans, Augustinians, and Mercedarians, had already established themselves. The Franciscans in Mexico, for instance, had been teaching the indigenous peoples trades and artistic skills before the arrival of the Jesuits, and the Dominicans had demonstrated a special interest in education and in the development of pedagogical systems.

Nonetheless, the Jesuits soon distinguished themselves from these other orders and developed a notably different profile. . . . The Jesuits were notable for seeking ways to promote artistic creativity among the indigenous peoples that would honor those peoples' own culture. This aspect of Jesuit policy was one source of the conflict with the Spanish crown, which disapproved of the Jesuits' program of teaching the native languages and delaying the learning of Spanish.

Another special and important feature of the Society in its activity in Spanish America was the diversity in origin of its members. The Jesuit lay brothers who were the architects, sculptors, painters, and silversmiths in the Society's many enterprises came from Italy, Germany, Bohemia, France, Flanders, Hungary, and Holland as well as from Spain and Portugal. Since these men interacted with one another, their diversity was a factor in the development of what came to be a distinctive style or group of styles in art and architecture.

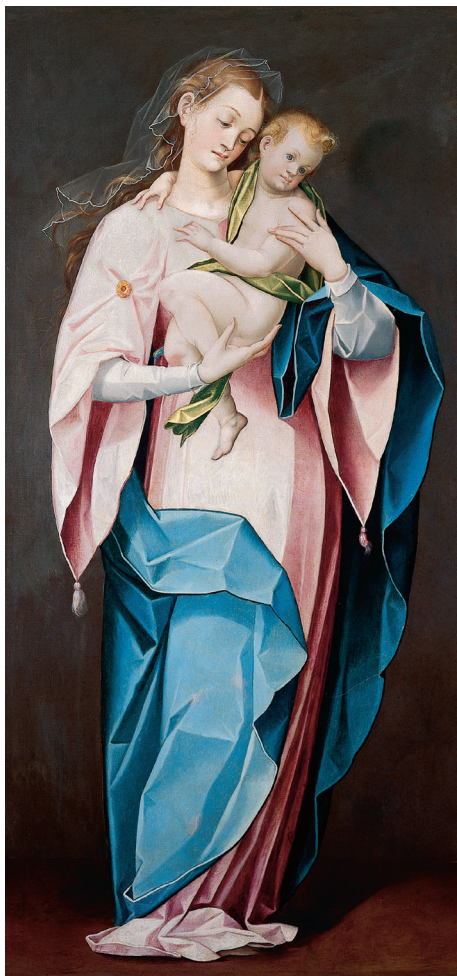


Figure 1. Bernardo Bitti, Virgin and Child. Oil and canvas, late 16th century. Anceps, church of the Compañía.

—Ramón Gutiérrez and Graciela María Vissalada  
The Jesuits and the Arts 1540-1773 (Saint Joseph's University Press, 2005)



Figure 2. Juan Rodríguez Juárez (Mexico), The Marriage of the Virgin Mary and Saint Joseph, 18th century. Oil on canvas, lunette, Chapel of St. Joseph, Saint Joseph's University Collection, Philadelphia.

—The editors, The Jesuits: Culture, Science, and The Arts, 1540-1773 (University of Toronto Press, 1999)



Figure 3. Gregorio Camarero, Saint Joseph and the Christ Child, 1607-12, Viceroyalty of Peru. Saint Joseph's University Collection, Philadelphia.

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Painting enjoyed a lofty position in the evangelization effort in colonial society, because it provided a basic reference point for the transmission of religious sentiment.

The role played by European prints and engravings during the early phase gradually yielded to the creativity of the Creole and Amerindian artists, who often reinterpreted religious themes. These themes predominate in the Viceroyalty as a result of the patronage of the Church and its constant demand for such materials, which in diverse forms were mass transmitters of the Christian message.

Painters who were members of the Society sometimes founded regional schools of painting. Brother Bernardo Bitti set up workshops in Cuzco and in Bolivia, where his slender mannerist figures embodied the "Roman" style of painting so highly valued at the end of the sixteenth century (see Figure 1).

Some Jesuit churches, such as the Profesa in Mexico City, became virtual museums since the principal artists of New Spain—from Echave Orío to José Juárez, his disciple Antonio Rodríguez, and his son Nicolás Rodríguez Juárez, as well as Cristóbal de Villalpando and later, Antonio de Torres—lived in the area. It is likely that the two greatest painters of colonial Mexico, Cristóbal de Villalpando and Miguel de Cabrera, would have had only limited opportunities to create without the patronage of the Society of Jesus. In the novitiate of Tepotzotlán, there are twenty-two paintings by Villalpando representing the life of Saint Ignatius.

While theatricality and spectacle may be recurring elements of Jesuit artistic style, found in Jesuit architecture, interior design, and public performances like theatre and ballet, they were often meant to effect a quiet inward transformation or a confirmation of faith. Along a remarkably broad and enduring confessional front, Jesuits employed artistic, literary, and musical expression both as aids in the conversion of non-Catholics and as means to strengthen and deepen the faith of those who were already Catholics.



Art historian Rogelio Ruiz Gomar reminds us that colonial artists almost always made paintings to order. The idea that a painter would set to work on something that occurred to him independently is a modern notion totally alien to the realities of the viceregal era. Since it is inconceivable that any client would commission a self-portrait, it follows that the painter produced it for his personal satisfaction, perhaps in recognition of his own importance as an artist. Following the death of Juan Correa and Cristóbal de Villalpando, Rodríguez Juárez surely knew he had no peer.

—The editors, The Jesuits: Culture, Science, and The Arts, 1540-1773 (University of Toronto Press, 1999)

## Latin American Architecture

The contribution of the Society of Jesus to the development of Latin American architecture is evident to anyone who has visited there. It was made principally during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, at which time the Baroque became a crucial element of Latin American culture.

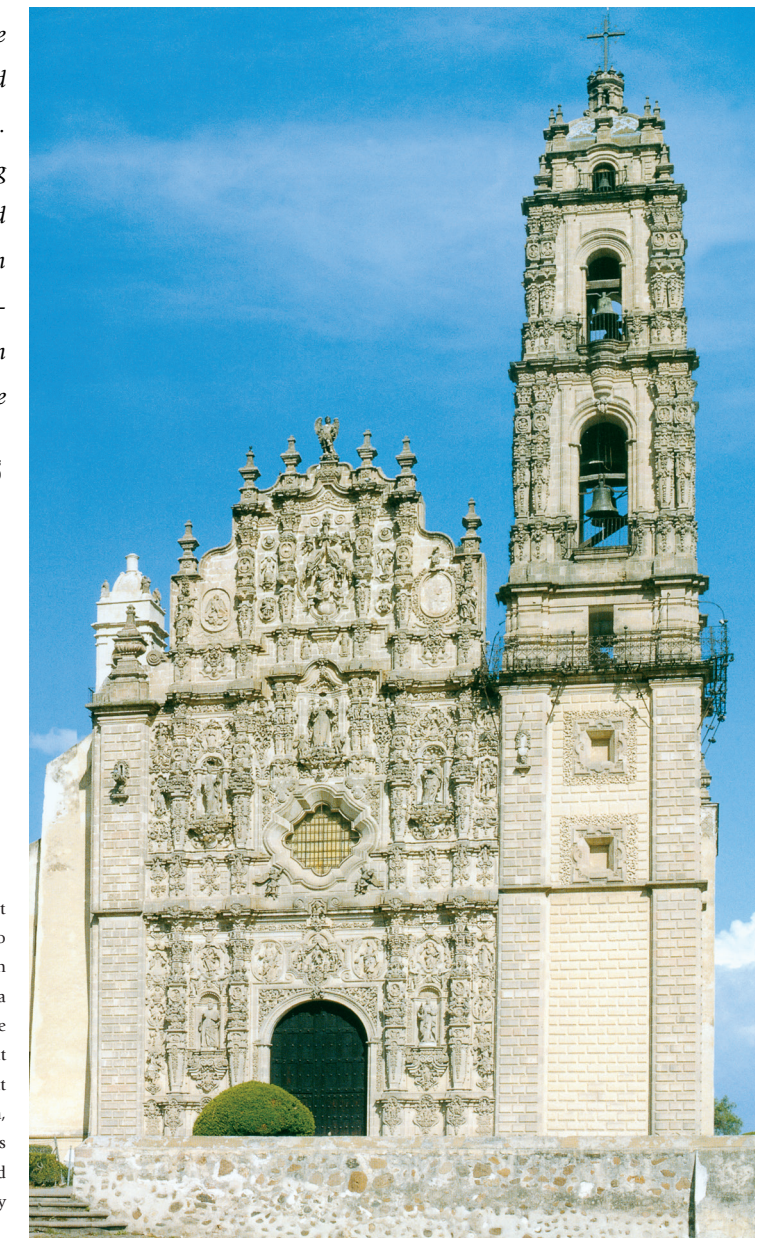


Figure 4. The Jesuit Novitiate church of Saint Francis Xavier in Tepotzotlán, the most important Novitiate in the Jesuit province of New Spain, featured one of the most decorated church facades in colonial Mexico, expressing a visual splendor that was rarely equaled.

Jesuit installations or holdings in the cities often grew to considerable size. Jesuit buildings had diverse functions and generally more uses than the buildings of the other religious congregations owing to the variety of Jesuit ministerial activity. The architecture of the Jesuits' urban churches is physically linked to the placement of their educational establishments—colleges, novitiates, seminaries, and universities.

Such installations generated a sort of network of buildings that established a presence in the city, one that was recognized by all social classes, and was especially evident in civic and religious festivities. Processions and parades, sometimes with men on horseback wearing colorful uniforms, were often part of the celebrations. Other undertakings, such as the maintenance of hospitals and pharmacies, consolidated the Jesuits' urban presence in ways that went far beyond the provision of liturgical services in their churches.

The Jesuits invested enormous sums in the construction of their churches, the furnishing of their houses and schools, the expansion of their libraries. . . . this investment was not strictly an economic matter; they were fundamentally intent on using these resources to pursue their religious, cultural, and spiritual goals.



Figure 5. Courtyard of the former Jesuit college of San Juan Bautista (later San Miguel) in the Bolivian town of Sucre is now the university, founded 1612.



Figure 6. Chapel of St. Joseph in the Jesuit Novitiate of Saint Francis Xavier in Tepotzotlán, Mexico, now the National Museum of Viceregal Art.



Figure 7. The Jesuits' Domestic Chapel in the Jesuit Novitiate of Saint Francis Xavier in Tepotzotlán, Mexico, now the National Museum of Viceregal Art.

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