

Jesuit Reductions and Workshops in South America



"The establishment in Paraguay by the Spanish Jesuits appears alone, in some way, the triumph of humanity. It seems to expiate the cruelties of the first conquerors. The Quakers in North America and the Jesuits in South America gave a new spectacle to the world."

—Voltaire, *Essai sur Les Mœurs et L'Esprit Des Nations* (1835)

The Jesuit Missions in Paraguay

When Antonio Ruiz de Montoya published his great work, the *Spiritual Conquest of Paraguay*, in Madrid—thirty years after the founding of San Ignacio Guazú, the first Reduction—the curiosity of the Spanish was aroused. Soon all Europe became interested in the Jesuit enterprise, and, indeed, idealized it.

—Philippe Lévesque, S.J., *In the Jesuits and the Arts, 1560-1773* (Saint Joseph's University Press, 2005)

The Urban Plan

Notwithstanding certain variations, the basic plans of the Reductions were identical. All the streets converged on a rectangular plaza, at the center of which was planted a cross. The orphanage, the cemetery, the church, and two courtyards were situated to the north and south along one side of the plaza. In the first courtyard stood the residence of the Jesuits, who never exceeded three, and a few dependent edifices, among them the armory and music room. The second courtyard was lined with offices and mechanical workshops. On the other three sides of the plaza were blocks of the Guarani houses. Each Reduction had a system of public services—mill and bake house, granary and food storehouse, slaughterhouse and butcher shop, brick kiln and metal foundry. Each had a water supply and a system of sewers. At their apogee, toward the middle of the eighteenth century, the urban development of the Reductions surpassed by far that of neighboring cities, with the exception of Buenos Aires and Córdoba.

Government and Economy

The Jesuits developed the cultivation of *yerba mate* (the tea of Paraguay), which, along with cotton and wool, soon became one of the principal resources of the Reductions. But the production of the carpentry shops and foundries, as well as the manufacture of hats, firearms, and musical instruments, was far from negligible.

The administration of the "republic" was as complex as its economy. The Jesuits had the final say, but the immediate authority belonged to the natives. In each Reduction, a council (*cabildo*) exercised legislative, executive, and judicial power. The *Libro de ordenes* (1649) describes the established civil and penal code. Uniquely at this time, the death penalty did not exist, and torture was forbidden. The heaviest sanction was imprisonment for ten years, and the most frequent punishment was the whip.

Daily Life

Concerning daily life in the Reductions, whose inhabitants eventually came to number 150,000, we have the impartial testimony of a Capuchin from Bourges dated 1711. Early in the morning the drum announced reveille. Shortly thereafter, the infirmity assistants busied themselves in providing whatever health care was needed. Then some of the *alcaldes* (mayors) conducted the children to the church for Mass and catechism, and then to school, where both boys and girls learned to read, write, and calculate. In addition, all were expected to learn some practical skill according to their inclination. The most gifted were directed to careers in administration and allowed, if they so desired, to learn Spanish. As for the adults, apart from the two days when they were required to be on the communal lands, they applied themselves—though never for more than six hours—either on their *chacras* (plots of land) or in their workshops.

Cultural Life

All this activity should not obscure the importance of cultural life in the Reductions. A printing press was set up in Paraguay nearly a century before the one in Buenos Aires, an astronomical observatory was constructed in the Reduction of San Cosme that attracted the attention of European universities; a pharmacopoeia was developed to treat all sorts of epidemics, and soon two hospitals were opened at Yapeyú and Candelaria. But if the Guarani in the domain of the sciences and technology were excellent assistants, those engaged in the fine arts showed themselves true masters. More subtle but equally important was the linguistic contribution of the Jesuits. By bringing diverse tribes together in the same Reduction, in the long run they enabled the Guarani to develop a common language—that is, a "unified language," which became established in all the reductions and remains one of the two languages spoken in Paraguay today. Moreover, thanks to the grammars and vocabularies of Ruiz de Montoya, they helped to establish a written Guarani.

A New Mode of Living

The idea emerged of creating a virtual "wall of faith" across the frontier using Amerindian villages under the responsibility of the Society. The beginnings were fairly difficult, since they meant trying to protect one's own not only from hostile tribes but also from the Portuguese marauders and unscrupulous owners of *encomiendas*, or plantations, who regarded the Amerindians as a source of cheap labor. The Indians were even more attractive targets once they had been educated by the Jesuits and had acquired valuable skills.

In each case the Jesuit goal was in one way or another to "reduce to a village" the Amerindian population (hence "Reduction") in order to better convert and protect the people and at the same time ensure a more efficient collection of the tributes exacted by the Spanish overlords.

The Jesuits believed that they could persuade nomadic natives to become sedentary and that ways of production could be found to ensure the basic economic sustenance of the community. This belief led the Jesuits to introduce among the Amerindians a newly productive and technologically advanced mode of living.

Reductions

"Reduction" is a transliteration of the Spanish word reducción, and it may perhaps best be translated as "community." The Spanish reducir, in the usage of the period, meant to gather into mission settlements. The Reductions marked a serious attempt by the Jesuits to save the Guarani Indians from enslavement by Portuguese bandeirantes as well as by Spanish colonists.

—C. I. McNapps, S.J.

In 1607 the Society of Jesus formed a new province of the Order to be known as the Province of Paraguay. The principal subjects of this missionary effort were the Guarani Indians, nomadic tribes who lived in an area south and east of Asunción in Paraguay.

The work of the missionaries among the Indians in South America was greatly hampered by the European colonists. Slave hunters, called Paulistas because they set out from São Paulo, regularly captured thousands of Indians and sold them into slavery. In one year alone, these raiders are reported to have killed or captured some thirty thousand Indians. They totally destroyed the first two Reductions of the Paraguay Province. For these reasons, together with the difficulty of keeping up with nomadic people, the Jesuits decided to separate their Indians from the Europeans and establish the mission settlements or Reductions in otherwise uninhabited areas.

In these remarkably organized settlements, the Jesuits provided for all the spiritual and material needs of the Indians, training them to practice not only the Christian faith, but numerous trades and crafts as well. And because of their exceptional native talents, the Guarani were soon able to practice most of the trades and crafts known at the time. Some became tailors, carpenters, joiners, builders; others became stone cutters, blacksmiths, tile makers; still others became painters, sculptors, printers, organ builders, copyists, and calligraphers.

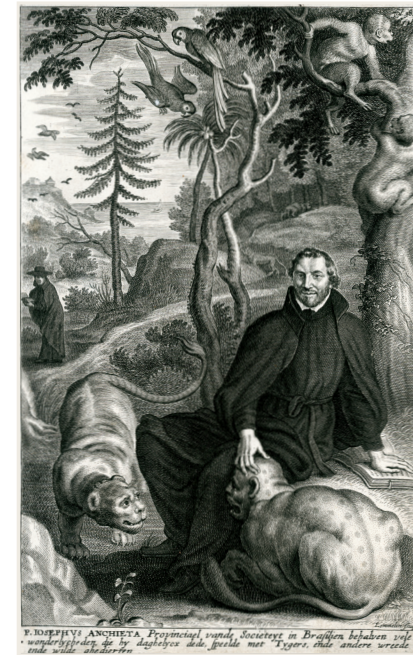


Figure 3. Translation "Father Joseph Anchieta, Provincial of the Society of Jesus in Brazil, Apart from the Many Remarkable Things He Did Daily, Played with Tigers and other Cruel, Wild Animals."

As the Reductions developed, each had an elementary school with Indian teachers educated by the Jesuits. In some of the Reductions, printing presses were set up and books were published. As early as 1705, the Indians had built their own presses and even made the type as well. The skill of the Indians is especially evident in the beautiful stone work seen in the ruins of the churches.

The Reductions of Paraguay have been called a model theocratic commonwealth. The Jesuits who directed these cities were an international team of men from Western Europe, Paraguay, and Peru who volunteered to serve on these missions. In 1772 the Guarani Reductions numbered over eighty thousand Indians in over thirty towns or cities. The great tragedy of the Paraguay Reductions came about in 1767 when the Jesuit priests and brothers were expelled from Spain and all of its colonies.

What remain today are noble ruins, some sculpture, and the memory of one of the brightest chapters in human history. Of the thirty mission towns known as the Paraguay Reductions, only eight lie, in various states of ruin, within the borders of present-day Paraguay. Another fifteen, generally more dilapidated, are located in the tongue of land between the giant Paraná and the Uruguay Rivers. This area, which today belongs to Argentina, is appropriately called Misiones. It is also called Mesopotamia, the land "between the rivers."

—C. I. McNapps, S.J., *Lost Cities of Paraguay: Art and Architecture of the Jesuit Reductions 1607-1767* (Loyola University Press, 1982)

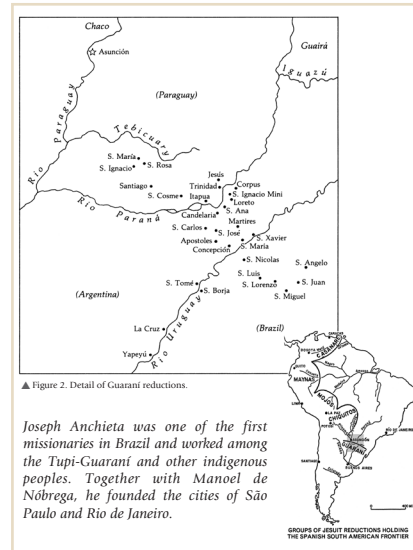


Figure 2. Detail of Guarani reductions. Joseph Anchieta was one of the first missionaries in Brazil and worked among the Tupi-Guarani and other indigenous peoples. Together with Manoel de Nóbrega, he founded the cities of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro.

Figure 3. Translation "Father Joseph Anchieta, Provincial of the Society of Jesus in Brazil, Apart from the Many Remarkable Things He Did Daily, Played with Tigers and other Cruel, Wild Animals."

No matter how remarkable they were in the social history of the western world, no matter how unique in the story of civilization, the Jesuit Reductions of Paraguay were begun and carried on as a missionary enterprise of the Society of Jesus.



Figure 4. Arches in the Indian houses in the Tindim Reduction, Paraguay.

The Jesuits designed Guarani residential quarters to accommodate the specific social and kinship groups of Guarani society. The long, one-story stone Guarani apartment blocks had individual cubicles for each family, and were surrounded by a veranda on stone columns. This type of veranda was unique to the Paraguay missions and represented an accommodation to the Guarani way of life, in which people tended to spend most of their time outdoors and so hung their hammocks between the columns.

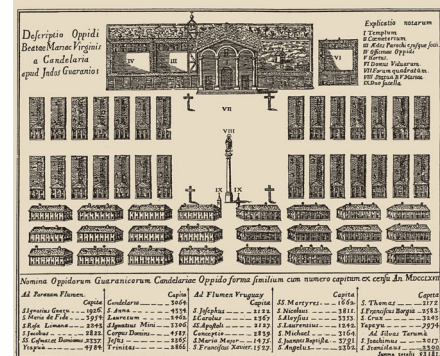


Figure 5. Mission town of La Benaventurada (founded 1616).

In the layout of the Guarani Reductions, certain royal stipulations had to be observed, but the designs show important departures from the law.

The Workshops

Although the Society had always tried to develop the abilities and special talents of its members, it realized there was a greater need than ever to do so in the early communities in Spanish America and, especially, in the missions. The isolation in which the Jesuits there found themselves and their having to accomplish on their own all sorts of tasks encouraged them to organize workshops. They themselves sometimes had to improvise as artisans and construction workers.

The Jesuits therefore concerned themselves with the training of indigenous artisans from the beginning, and it is evident that they transmitted to these artisans the skills necessary for the construction of large projects. The Jesuits understood that skill in the arts could contribute to the human development of the indigenous people. Just as the missions had schools to teach reading, writing, and music, so they had workshops to train blacksmiths, carpenters, joiners, lathe operators, weavers, and other artisans.

The policy of developing individual talents and abilities was not limited, therefore, to members of the order or to the students in the colleges. The Jesuits applied the policy in all their undertakings in Spanish America. Both in the missions and on the plantations a focus on each person's skills was a given. The policy was applied even more emphatically in the Jesuits' dealings with young people, who had greater capacity for learning.

The young became apprentices in the trade for which they seemed to have the greatest talent. This approach benefited the individuals concerned as well as the community, which would profit from their services as artisans, musicians, and nurses.

One village would be known for its sculpture, another for its musical instruments and printing, and a fourth for its textiles. These specializations developed as a result of the specific talents that emerged in a given location, or the kind of training had by the artisans originally found there, who could act as masters for apprentices, or the possibilities indicated by the site itself. Thus, in Chiquitos in Paraguay and in Baja California the Amerindians worked with cotton partly owing to the ease of cultivation and partly owing to the cloth's appropriateness to the climate.

How was such a high level of excellence achieved in so many fields? The Jesuits embodied and tried to impart an interiorized integration of daily life with religious life. This was something that fitted with the traditions of the indigenous peoples. Building on that reality, the Jesuit style of evangelization, which united manual labor with prayer, dance with liturgy, and theater with the worship of God, took this integration much farther than did the other religious orders. That is why its effects lasted long after the fateful date of 1767.

—Ramón Contreras and Cecilia María Vissalada, S.J., in *The Jesuits and the Arts, 1560-1773* (Saint Joseph's University Press, 2005)



Figure 6. Interior and pulpit decorated with mica in the Reduction church of San Rafael de Chiquitos, Bolivia.

The Chiquitos missions, like their Guarani counterparts, were important arts and crafts centers, and the tradition continues today thanks to the energy of the Franciscans, who now possess these churches.

Art of the Guarani Sculptors

Paraguay was home to the most flourishing mission sculpture workshops in colonial Latin America. Each of the seventy Jesuit mission churches, of which only thirty remained when the Jesuits were expelled from Spanish territories in 1767, contained giant gilt and painted retable housing what must have been thousands of sculptures in total. So many sculptures were made, in fact, that the reductions did a brisk trade with neighboring regions both in retablos and statues. Although very few retablos survive today, hundreds of sculptures can still be seen in the museums of Paraguay, Argentina, and Brazil, works of astonishing power and originality, carved mainly from cedar wood by indigenous craftsmen. The artists worked in groups of eight to ten under the supervision of a master, who was usually a Guarani noble, in the second courtyard next to the church, where they were supervised periodically by the Jesuit fathers. In addition to sculpture, Guarani artists and artisans made retablos, furniture, gold- and silverwork, musical instruments, bells, ceramics, embroidery, and crafts (such as spoons) out of horn or antler.

The art of the Guarani sculptors is at once eclectic and unmistakable, a testament to the skill and flexibility of its makers, who had an agility with native hardwood, but who—remarkably—had no pre-Hispanic tradition of sculpture. Art historians have coined the term "Hispano-Guarani Baroque" to describe the often flamboyant style of these sculptures.

—Cecilia Alexander Bailey, *Art of Colonial Latin America* (Phaidon Press, 2005)



Figure 7. A 21st-century mission workshop, Concepción, Bolivia.

Chiquitos were also particularly skilled at carving wooden sculpture, as this detail from an elaborate painted and gilt retable attests.

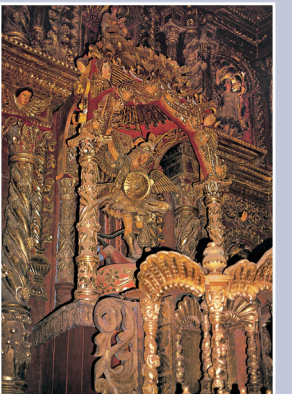


Figure 8. Detail of the main retable in the Reduction church of San Miguel de Chiquitos, Bolivia.