

Flemish contributions to colonial mexican painting

by

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The purpose of this paper is to introduce four lesser known Colonial Mexican Paintings, that belong to the Denver (Colorado) Art Museum (The Jan & Frederick R. Mayer Collection) and are on loan to the Mexican Pavilion at Epcot (Orlando, Florida).

A few introductory words are required, in order to illustrate the cultural and political climate of the times and of the place of execution.

The Spanish Conquest introduced western culture to Mexico as well as to the remainder of Spanish-speaking Latin America. In Mexico, more particularly, the symbols change very soon from Aztec gods and goddesses to the Cross erected by the monks throughout the country. A particularly severe form of the Inquisition operating with even greater terror than in Spain (1487-1833) suppressed native Indian art with the greatest stringency. To the point where very few foreigners dared to come thither, for fear of being falsely accused of Lutheranism, especially during the reign of Philip II. The Colonial period of Mexico or New Spain dates from the beginning of the sixteenth century to the first decades of the nineteenth. Although the number of foreigners who dared to settle in

Mexico after 1600 was limited and their average ability in the art fields was poor, Colonial Art mainly adopted the traces and concepts of Italy and Flanders. One would have surmised that Spaniards being the occupying authority, Colonial Art would have followed in their cultural footsteps. The influence was two-pronged however. In Lima and Quito, Murillo and Zurbarán were the principal models. Mexico however, opted for prints from Rome and Antwerp as the main models for the newly established autochthonous School.

Indians appear but rarely in Colonial Art, and solely in a few series of the Conquest or as racial types illustrating the Spanish caste system. The Church forbade in 1570 in Quito the sale of profane images to the Indians, who not knowing better, might pray to them. The Painters' Guilds, first established in Mexico in 1556 and then elsewhere (Puebla, Bogotá, Lima), excluded natives until c. 1700, and members teaching Indians were expelled.

Nevertheless, Indians artists survived because they were chiefly employed by the friars both, in the countryside and in such mainly Indian cities as Quito or Potosí. The reason being that they worked for less money than the guild members and often furnished work that was by no means inferior to theirs. All in all, whether conquerors, European immigrants, or natives, they did not rise above purely craftsman level and were bereft of innovation as to form and content of their works. Where they all stood out, was in the brilliance and intensity of their color scheme. Pre-Columbian art had made ample use of earth and vegetable pigments of high quality. When the Spaniards took over, some such colors as Indian cochineal (carmine) and indigo (aniline) were even exported by the settlers to Europe on a commercial basis. To these the Colonial artists joined such basic pigments as vermilion, blue, ochre as well as red, black and white earth colors, and occasionally green and carmine. For supports, there were plenty of excellent woods, while locally produced canvases and brushes were coarser than in the old country. During the baroque period of the seventeenth century, which mainly preoccupies us here, deep and intense colors were primarily in use.

As already briefly touched upon, Colonial art in Mexico drew almost exclusively upon non-Spanish sources, although of course parts of Italy and Flanders were part of the Spanish empire. The main origin for ideas and styles stemmed from imported prints (some even German or French), with occasional original works sent from Antwerp. They were usually brought there by Flemish painters desirous to settle in this part of the New World and willing to brave the dangers inherent to the rigors of the Inquisition. Many of these immigrants were friars, and therefore less

susceptible to be troubled by the local religious authorities. They built churches in a mixture of Gothic, Renaissance and Mozarabic architecture. The walls were decorated with murals for which they employed Indian artists, providing them with models from illustrated books and prints. We know altogether over sixty ex-convents with elaborate frescoes, in the majority Franciscan, though closely followed by Augustinian and Dominican. What certain authors designate as native expressions and hence argue that Mexican Colonial art was not merely a reflexion of European styles, has nevertheless nothing in common with native culture prior to the Conquest. The content of these murals mostly concentrated in the valley of Mexico, remained closely supervised by the friars in view of the edification and conversion of the Indians. It is solely in the execution, and the brilliant color scheme, that the psychological need of the conquered for pomp, ceremony and ostentation was taken into account. Stylistically, we have in the over-whelming majority to do with part-or entire copies after the workshops of Quentin Metsys, the Antwerp Master of the Prodigal Son, Willem Key; and from prints after Marten de Vos and Stradanus. Albrecht Duerer's and Lucas van Leyden's graphic productions also circulated freely and were amply used as prototypes. In Bolivia, originals or Colonial copies after Mabuse, Joos van Cleef, and even an early Pieter Aertsen, survive to this day.

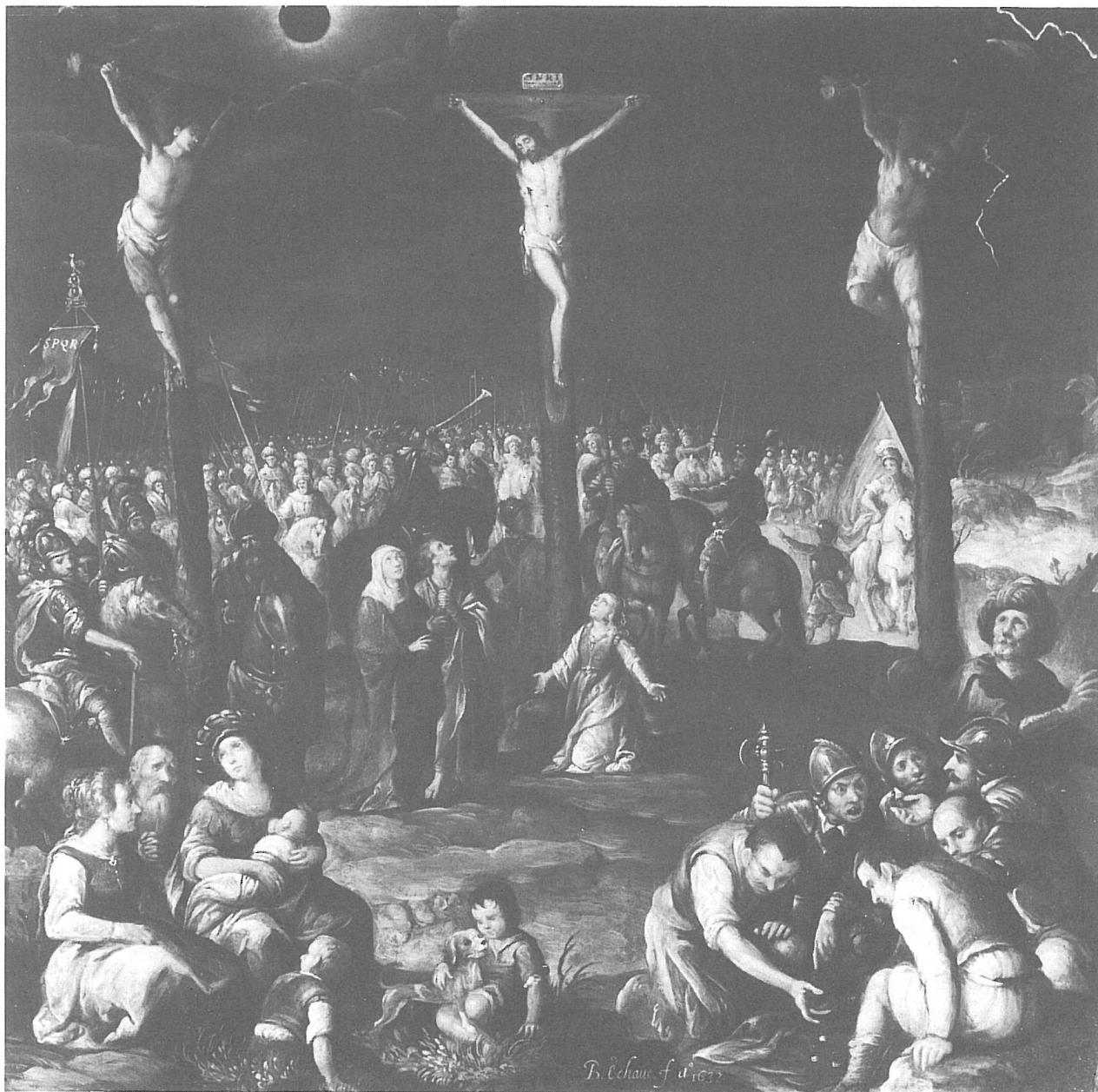
The first important European painter to arrive in Mexico, and who was not a religious, is *Simon Pereyng*, a native of Antwerp. He had left that city in 1558, successively worked in Lisbon, Toledo and Madrid, and came to Mexico in 1556. He came to regret this decision, because jealous Spanish colleagues promptly denounced him to the Inquisition as being the son of a Lutheran. Released after cruel torture (1568), he still retained enough vigor to paint at least a dozen conventual retables based, at least in the best preserved one (Huejotzingo, 1586), upon prints after Marten de Vos. Thus, as early as the second half of the sixteenth century, we find a documented Flemish workshop in Mexico City. The influence from the Catholic Southern Low-Countries (then under Spanish rule), continued in Mexico during the subsequent two centuries and more than balanced that of Spain. Flanders, especially owing to the impact of *Peter Paul Rubens* and his School, forcefully contributed to the flourishing of the Baroque in New Spain. Local artists adopted the style and thrived by immersing themselves in it.

The first two paintings that I want to introduce here are both signed and dated (1637 and 1638, respectively), by *Baltasar de Echave Ibia*, active c. 1620-50. Echave Ibia was the son of a well-known painter, Baltasar de Echave Orio, who was a Spanish-born immigrant. He stemmed from a

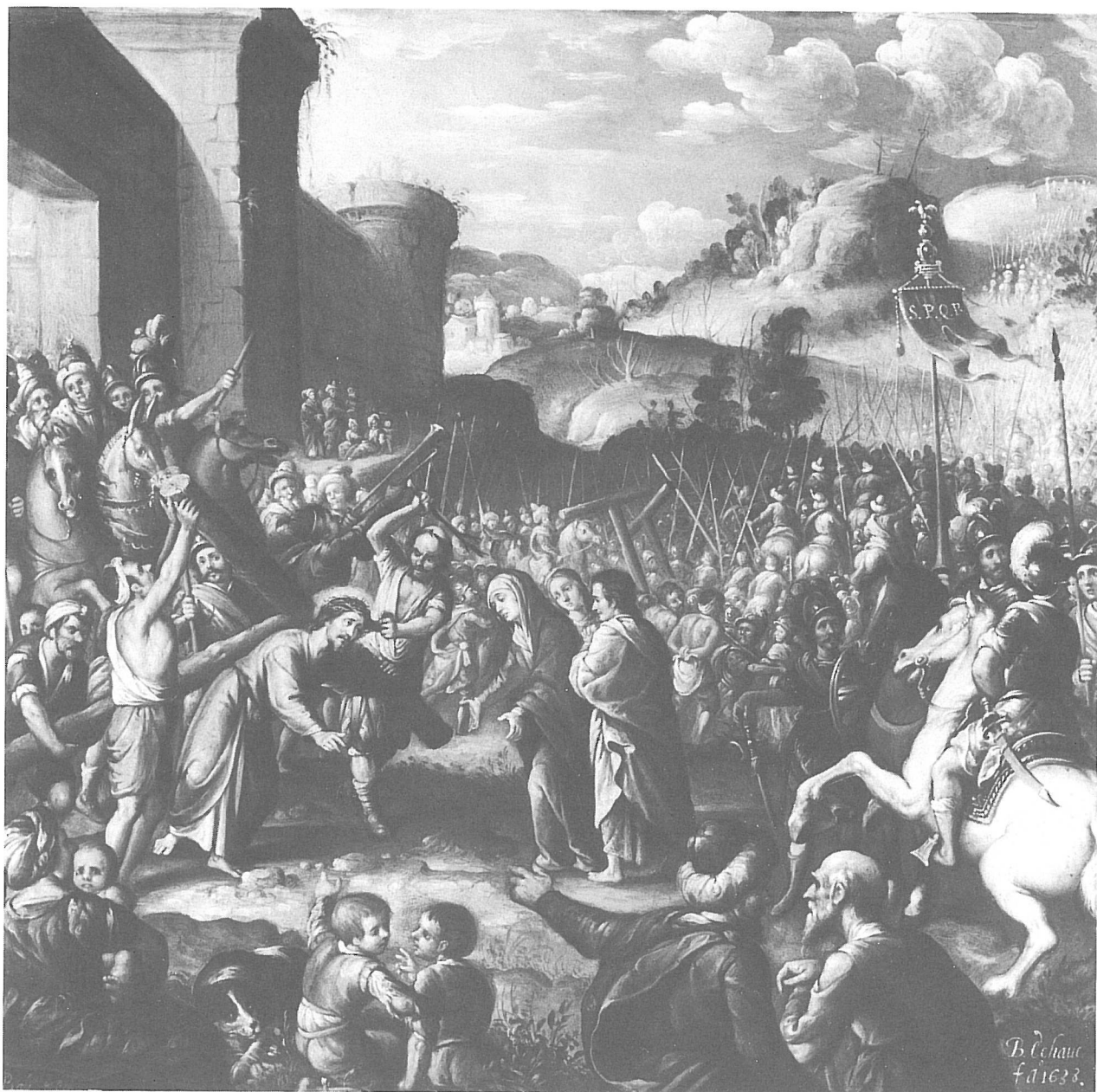
noble family near Zumaya (Guipúzcoa, Spain) and was born about 1548. Echave Orío first moved to Andalusia at the age of twenty-five and thence to Mexico, where he arrived c. 1580. About twenty-five of his paintings are known and in the main derive from Florentine prototypes datable from the 1570's.

His son Echave Ibía, was Mexican-born. Among his principal merits as an artist we count the integration of landscape into composition, as well as a good understanding of anatomy, and grasp of relationships in space. He and Luis Juárez (c. 1585-c. 1645) were contemporaries, but Echave Ibía remained by far the better and more influential artist. He showed a curious predilection for the repeated use of small copper plates for his paintings—another token of the influence of Flemish and German artists who, already some fifty years earlier, had introduced this kind of support into their technical vocabulary (e.g., Jean Brueghel the Elder and Adam Elsheimer). The Academy of Mexico and the Gallery at Querétaro own representations of the «Evangelists» executed in this fashion by Echave Ibía. To these we want to add «The Crucifixion» and «The Road to Calvary» at the Denver Museum (ill. 1 and 2). The panels are small, $16 \frac{7}{8} \times 17$ inches for the former, and $16 \frac{3}{4} \times 16 \frac{5}{8}$ inches for the latter. Both derive in their composition, with an abundance of small figures, inspiration and execution, from the early work of Jan Brueghel the Elder, insofar as they echo his style from about 1590. The hues are bright, with blue, sienna and vermilion standing out, and the blending of the landscape with the composition is done in imitation of the work of Joachim Patenier and his School. Thus, any Italian influence can be deemed negligible in these paintings, entirely permeated by Flemish reminiscences.

From then onwards (let us remember that the two preceding Denver panels date from 1637 and 1638), Mexican Colonial painting took a turn toward the High Baroque and decisively espoused the Rubensian impetus. The most significant artists of the trend often marry Pieter Paul's verve with inspirations drawn from Murillo (who himself, was greatly influenced by Anthony van Dyck —another famous Fleming). Among members of the group, we want to briefly cite Echave Ibía's son Baltasar de Echave Rioja (1632-82), Pedro Ramírez (fl. 1650-78), Antonio Rodríguez (fl. 1650-86), Juan Rodríguez Juárez (1675-1728), Juan Correa (fl. 1674-1714) and *Cristóbal de Villalpando* (c. 1652-1714). It is the latter who most interests here. First, because he was the most talented, vigorous and imaginative master of the entire tendency. Furthermore, his outstanding and fertile productivity allows us to judge and appreciate his *oeuvre* better than that of many contemporaries. In movement and sumptuous-



Baltasar de Echave Ibia, «The Crucifixion» (Denver Art Museum)



Baltasar de Echave Ibia, «Road to Calvary» (Denver Art Museum)





ness, he closely mirrors Peter Paul Rubens, as e.g., in his monumental «The Church Militant» at Mexico Cathedral, which directly derives from the Fleming's «Triumph of the Eucharist». His sources consisted mainly of European prints, and aside from borrowings from the Flemings, he also drew upon Ribera and Murillo. Among works by Villalpando preserved in the United States, it behoves to mention an «Ecce Homo» (New York Historical Society) and a «St. Michael» (Hartford, Connecticut). To these, we now can add a «Saint Martin of Tours» at the Denver Art Museum (ill. 3), on canvas and measuring 63 1/2 × 41 inches. The head of the Saint rather echoes Valdés Léal, but the compact composition and the type of the beggar are pure Flemish. So also is the brightness of the color scheme, with rose, vermilion, light and dark blue, green and white, predominating. Altogether, it is with him that the High Baroque in Mexico attains its highest level, not least on account of the evident attunement to Flemish inspiration and patterns.

To round out this short presentation, I want to adduce a relatively early work by *Diego de Borgraf* (ill. 4), also from the Denver Art Museum. It is signed and dated 1656. Borgraf was born in Antwerp and arrived in Mexico (Puebla) in 1648, where he was active until his death in 1686. His name —de Borgraf— is an hispanized translation from the original «de Borchgraves» which belongs to an old and noble Flemish family whose descendants can still be found in present-day Belgium. The canvas represents «Saint Catherine of Alexandria» and measures 66 × 45 3/4 inches. The artist apparently brought many European prints with him and e.g., his «Lord of the Winepress» (Puebla, San Miguelito) closely follows one by Wierix —subsequently copied all over Latin America. In his «Saint Catherine of Alexandria» Borgraf remains under the sway of the Rubens School, more particularly in this instance that of Théodore van Thulden. Derivative from Rubens through this intermediacy, the Fleming residing in Mexico remains true to the three-dimensional values, heavy treatment of textiles, and spatiality of his early training. Although not exceedingly inventive, he remained a solid representative of his artistic origins, and brought to his adoptive land qualities, that significantly enhanced the flourishing of the Baroque in that remote country.

To sum up: contrary to common assumption, Mexican Colonial Art and more specifically painting, benefited from contributions that were extraneous to the Spanish motherland. Among them, Flemish influence is to be cited as one of the most meaningful factors. The Paintings, here briefly described and illustrated, constitute cases in point and bear out my contention.

ABRIDGED LITERATURE

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