

Rector Father Castañeda's artistic patronage at the Jesuit College of Oaxaca as revealed in his personal correspondence

El patronazgo artístico del rector Padre Castañeda en el Colegio Jesuita de Oaxaca visto a través de su correspondencia personal

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ABSTRACT: The Jesuits carried out a noteworthy educational mission in the Viceroyalty of New Spain. For that purpose they built capable edifices and decorated them with artistic contents that facilitated that endeavor, and allowed it to thrive. One of those complexes was the College of Oaxaca, the primary educational institution in one of the most prosperous viceregal cities and third in importance among the more than thirty colleges that the Jesuits founded in New Spain, representing a clear example of the process of spiritual, intellectual, and material expansion that the Society of Jesus carried out in Spanish America. The discovery, among other documents, of a set of letters penned by one of its last rectors has revealed that it once featured a significantly rich artistic program, one that, unfortunately, has been progressively disappearing since the banishment of the Jesuits from Oaxaca in 1767.

Keywords: New Spain; Viceroyalty; Jesuits; Jesuit Iconography; Jesuit Colleges; Miguel Cabrera; Juan Patricio Morlete; Felipe de Ureña; Our Lady of Loreto; Oaxaca.

RESUMEN: Los jesuitas realizaron una notable labor educativa en el Virreinato de Nueva España. Para ello construyeron edificios grandes y aptos, y los decoraron con contenidos artísticos que facilitaron dicha labor y contribuyeron a su florecimiento. Uno de dichos complejos fue el Colegio de Oaxaca, la principal institución educativa en una de las ciudades virreinales más prósperas, y el tercero en importancia de entre los más de treinta colegios fundados por los jesuitas en territorio novohispano, representando un claro ejemplo del proceso de expansión espiritual, intelectual y material que la Compañía de Jesús llevó a cabo en Hispanoamérica. El hallazgo, entre otros documentos, de una serie de cartas escritas por uno de sus últimos rectores ha revelado que el centro llegó a contar con un rico conjunto artístico, que ha ido lamentablemente desapareciendo desde la expulsión de los jesuitas de Oaxaca en 1767.

Palabras clave: Nueva España; Virreinato; Jesuitas; Iconografía jesuita; Colegios jesuitas; Miguel Cabrera; Juan Patricio Morlete; Felipe de Ureña; Nuestra Señora de Loreto; Oaxaca.

INTRODUCTION

The Jesuit complex of Oaxaca, in Southern Mexico, was founded in 1575, three years after the arrival of the first Jesuits to Mexico City. The Jesuits experienced fierce opposi-

tion to their establishment in the city from the Dominican community, but they eventually set up their residence in a lot located five hundred feet southwest of the Cathedral, in the very heart of the city's urban fabric. The institution began operating without a

founder, and it continued to do so for years, since, when in 1685 the Portuguese captain and merchant Manuel Fernández de Fiallo was admitted as founder (after having donated thirty thousand *pesos* for the establishment of chairs in Grammar, Philosophy and Theology)¹, the Father Provincial who accepted the foundation indicated in one of his annual reports that “despite being one of the oldest in the Province, it [the college] does not have a founder”². Nevertheless, this absence of a lifelong patron during its first hundred years of existence did not necessarily result in the shortage or the limitation of resources. As the archival documentation reveals, several individuals were willing to support its endeavors in that century of institutional existence, and the complex also depended on the occasional income that it obtained from the operation of various rural estates in the vicinity of Oaxaca. For that reason, in a letter written by the Provincial on January 20, 1592, he reminded the institution of its “obligation of paying back with great spiritual acts the abundance with which the Lord is gracing it in the material realm”³.

The church, an integral part of any Jesuit school, was inaugurated on September 21, 1575, and dedicated, like many other Jesuit churches in Spanish America, to Saint Francis Xavier, one of Saint Ignatius' first companions at the University of Paris and a pioneer in the missionary tradition that has characterized the Society of Jesus since its inception. This primitive church would be destroyed in 1604, and again in 1727, as a result of various natural disasters—the first school building would be severely damaged as well. Although the Jesuit chronicles do not describe the appearance of this primitive temple, it is plausible to believe that it

might have featured the two main characteristics present in every Jesuit liturgical building: a large, single aisle, which served as a classroom for preaching, and a shallow sanctuary for conducting sacramental activity. In 1576 the school initiated its activity by offering classes in Latin grammar. A reference in an annual report dated November 20, 1595 reveals that the works in the school building had not started by then—specifically, the document recorded that a Jesuit Father named Juan de Mendoza had deemed it advisable to start constructing the school building that year, “even if it is necessary to do it little by little”⁴. This piece of information might be indicating that the school building was erected decades after the church—a customary practice among the Jesuits—and that the temple could have been temporarily used as a classroom. Not much is known about the primitive school building either, but in a general inventory of the religious buildings that existed in Oaxaca in 1598, took by the then bishop of the city, Bartolomé de Ledesma, at the request of King Philip II of Spain, it is said that the Jesuit school was “a common building, in accordance with the Franciscan, the Augustinian, and the Dominican convents”⁵. This edifice probably featured a cloister with classrooms and offices in its two levels, “a testimony of the Jesuit aspiration to order”⁶. We have explored the institutional and architectural history of the school complex from its foundational stage somewhere else⁷.

Archival documentation related to the complex reveals that, particularly in the last decades of its institutional history, coinciding

⁴ *Ibidem*, fol. 134v., 1595.

⁵ Archivo General de Indias (from now on AGI), *Audiencia de México*, Legajo 357, 1598.

⁶ C. CHANFÓN OLMOS (coord.), *Historia de la arquitectura y el urbanismo mexicanos*, Vol. 2, México, 2001, p. 247.

⁷ M. MELLADO CORRIENTE, *The Architecture of Knowledge: The Jesuit College of Oaxaca (XVI-XIX Centuries)*, Ph.D. dissertation defended at Virginia Commonwealth University, Ann Arbor, 2015.

¹ Archivum Romanum Societatis Iesu (from now on ARSI), *Fondo Gesuitico*, Collegia 106, Documento 1477/20, 1685.

² *Ibidem*, *Antica Compagnia, Assistentia Hispaniae, Mexicana*, *Epp. Gen. 1668-1688*, Mexico 3, fol. 236r., 1685.

³ *Ibidem*, *Epp. Gen. 1574-1599*, Mexico 1, fol. 113r., 1592.

with “the golden age of the Society of Jesus in New Spain”⁸, those responsible for it commissioned a considerable number of works of art from some of the most important colonial artists, such as Juan Patricio Morlete, Miguel Cabrera and Felipe Ureña, among others, which were or would be displayed in the church and the school building. This significant artistic patronage might have been the result of a thriving financial situation, but the archival documentation shows that, even when the institution was facing serious debt, those in charge of its management did not cease to commission works of art and ornaments. For instance, in 1677 the Society's Superior General had had to admonish the Oaxacan institution and to remind it that it was a superfluous expense to do “gilded and costly retables without the need for it, and very precious paintings and ornaments for the churches in an indebted college”⁹. Regrettably, few artworks from the period in which the Jesuits operated the Oaxacan complex were left in place after their banishment in 1767. Some of them might have been returned to their owners, Jesuits and members of the congregations that met in the school church, among them. Hence the significance of the discovery of archival documentation such as Father Castañeda's correspondence, which leaves proof of the existence of those artworks, and of their value. Despite being removed from their original repositories –the Jesuits' residences and institutions– and being partially mislaid and even destroyed in the process, these archival documents still constitute the primary source of information on the Jesuits.

FATHER CASTAÑEDA'S TERM

Father Castañeda was rector of the Oaxacan institution approximately between 1759 and 1766, a key period in the history of

the Society of Jesus in New Spain, since it was then, and in the previous years, when, thanks to a thriving economic situation, the Jesuits who ran the residences and colleges –particularly those that were located in provincial towns such as Oaxaca– were able to commission and acquire a significant portion of artworks to embellish them. Between 1760 and 1766 Castañeda penned a series of letters that discussed topics of an artistic nature. Only in the course of the year 1760 he wrote and sent, to the best of our knowledge, a total of seven letters to fellow Jesuit Martín María Montejano, who lived in the College of San Pedro and San Pablo, in the viceregal capital. One of such letters is dated April 14, 1760. Montejano appears to have been a *procurador*, a purveyor, or procurator, that is, a Jesuit in charge of the financial management of the colleges and whose task, among others, was to mediate in the provision of artworks and ornaments for the different Jesuit establishments. This letter, like the rest that will be examined in this article, is approximately eight and a half inches long and five and a half inches wide. These valuable documents confirm that each religious order has its own particular iconography¹⁰. In this first letter Father Castañeda wonders if Montejano has received a letter that he sent to him a few days earlier, and goes on to say that he is now commissioning, aided by a Jesuit Father, an image of Saint Stanislas, and that if Father Montejano can ask that other Jesuit for its price he will very much appreciate if he can let him know, since he still has his coins with which “to adorn the church, and I am trying to do three new retables that I will start this week, because there is [money] with which [to do them], since God does not disregard poor people, and little by little we are doing something”¹¹.

⁸ G. DECORME, S.J., *La obra de los jesuitas mexicanos durante la época colonial, 1572-1767*, Vol. 1, México, 1941, p. 103.

⁹ ARSI, *Antica... Epp. Gen. 1668-1688*, Mexico 3, fol. 103v., 1677.

¹⁰ E. MÂLE, *El arte religioso de la Contrarreforma. Estudios sobre la iconografía del final del siglo XVI y de los siglos XVII y XVIII*, Madrid, 2001, p. 411.

¹¹ Archivo General de la Nación (from now on AGN), *Instituciones Coloniales, Jesuitas IV*, 45366, Caja 26, Legajo 16, Expediente 113, fol. 140r., 1760.

This document, and the ones that will be subsequently analyzed, indicate that Castañeda's role in the Oaxacan complex might have been as crucial as that of Father Francisco Xavier de Faria –who completed his rectorship in 1668, implementing a series of material improvements at both the church and the school building– since he is commissioning a significant number of artworks in (or, most probably, after) a period of relative scarcity of resources. The Jesuit's reference to poverty, however, should not be taken literally. These expressions might have been a formality in the correspondence of the colonial period. The letter also confirms that the institution was determined to continue to give shape to a markedly educational and unmistakably Jesuit artistic iconographic program. Saint Stanislas Kostka (1550-1568), patron of the Jesuit novices and students, was a Polish novice. He was beatified in 1605 and canonized in 1726. A contemplative Jesuit, like Saint Luis Gonzaga, who will be introduced later on, and unlike Saint Ignatius Loyola and Saint Francis Xavier, who were considered men of action, he was called by his fellow members "an angel covered in human nature" and his image was frequently visible in Jesuit churches –especially in Rome, where he died of malaria at age seventeen and where he was buried– in response to critiques that accused the Jesuits of being only concerned with worldly matters¹². Most probably, the work that Castañeda commissioned showed the young saint with one or several of his traditional attributes: dressed in the Jesuit habit, carrying a white iris in his hand as a symbol of his purity, receiving the Christ Child in his arms, and holding the Blessed Sacrament¹³. Unfortu-

¹² E. MÂLE, *Op. cit.*, p. 416.

¹³ The Jesuits promoted the belief that Saint Stanislas had received communion from the angels. During the Counter-Reformation it was common to represent saints receiving the communion, in an attempt to defend the institution of the Eucharist against the Protestants. Particularly popular were the representations of the miraculous communions that the saints from the Catholic religious orders had allegedly received.

nately, no material traces of this work have been found yet, but the inventory that the Spanish authorities took after the banishment of the Jesuits from Oaxaca, which we have analyzed somewhere else¹⁴, records that it was a canvas *de enrollar* –a probable reference to a painting that stayed rolled up most of the time, and was displayed, by unrolling it, only on special festivities– and that it was part of the replica of the House of Loreto that existed in the church.

In a letter signed only a few months later, on July 28, it is revealed that the creator of that image was Miguel Cabrera (1695-1768), one of the greatest 18th-century New Spanish painters. A native Oaxacan –a Zapotec Indian, according to some contemporary sources– Cabrera was prolific and versatile, as well as an instructor and the president of the first painting academy in Mexico City, predecessor of the Academy of San Carlos. Not much is known about his training. Jesuit institutions throughout New Spain commissioned a significant number of works from him, which he completed thanks to the support of a large workshop¹⁵. He was influenced by Murillo and Rubens, among others, and is most famous for his *casta* paintings, sets of paintings depicting family groups with parents of different races and their children. When he received Father Castañeda's commission, the artist was at the apex of his career, widely recognized as the official painter of Our Lady of Guadalupe, whom the Pope had named Patroness of New Spain in 1754 and whose cult the Jesuits had largely helped to promote through writings, sermons and works of art. Although the Oaxacan version has not been located, another canvas by Cabrera, which depicts the Virgin Mary and the Christ Child offering lilies to Saint Luis Gonzaga and Saint Stanislas (Fig. 1), shows the kindness, the humanity and the refinement with which the master surely

¹⁴ M. MELLADO, *Op. cit.*, pp. 185-233.

¹⁵ L. E. ALCALÁ, "Miguel Cabrera y la Congregación de la Purísima", *Anales del Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas*, Vol. XXXIII, nº 99, 2011, pp. 111-136.

represented Kostka in Castañeda's commission.



▪ Fig. 1. Miguel Cabrera. *La Virgen y el Niño Jesús ofrecen azucenas como símbolo de pureza a San Luis Gonzaga y a San Estanislao Kotska*. 1750. Andrés Blaisten Collection, Mexico. © Cortesía Colección Blaisten.

In this second letter, nevertheless, Castañeda starts by kindly asking Father Montejano to give “master Cabrera”, as he calls him, twenty-eight *pesos* in order to pay for two other canvases by his hand, one of them representing the Calvary and another one depicting Our Lady of Guadalupe, which Cabrera had sent to Father Roque—at the College of Oaxaca, it can be inferred-. The commission for a Calvary might be related to the Congregación de la Anunciata, since meditating on the Passion of Christ was one of the exercises that the members of this sodality, who met at the school church, had to complete¹⁶. This would be again con-

¹⁶ The Jesuits contributed significantly to the promotion of a new iconographical model of the Crucifixion that became popular during the Counter-Reformation and that showed the moment in which the cross was being raised by the executioners. E. MÂLE, *Op. cit.*, p. 250.

firming that the art that the Jesuits commissioned was closely related to their educational and spiritual mission. The rector goes on to say that a few days have passed since he assigned another Jesuit the task of commissioning the Saint Stanislaus from Cabrera on behalf of the Oaxacan complex. If that spokesperson is not staying “in that college” [the Colegio Máximo] anymore, the rector cordially asks his interlocutor to meet with Cabrera and tell him that the canvas must be two and a quarter *varas* long, and one and a sixth *varas* wide. If the master cannot do it, “be it done by another [artist] of his [the master’s] satisfaction”, Castañeda concludes¹⁷. Time seems to have been a primary concern for the rector: he had commissioned the image with the hope that he could “dedicate it on the day of Our Holy Father”. This may be referring to the festivities of Saint Ignatius (July 31), Saint Stanislas (August 15), Saint Francis Borgia (October 3), or Saint Francis Xavier (December 3), but most probably to that of the Society’s founder. The canvas was the only one missing “in the adornment of the pilasters” —perhaps a reference to an altarpiece, since the platform and the frame for it had already been built and gilded-. Castañeda finishes his letter pointing out that that day was the first anniversary of the dedication of the church. This, as we know it today, was therefore completed in 1759.

Not a week had passed when Castañeda sent another letter to Montejano, writing in the margin: “Do not stop the [image of] Saint Stanislas from being sent”¹⁸. The reason for the delay could have been pecuniary. Right above Castañeda’s request, which is located in the bottom left-hand corner of the document, it can be read *30 qq de cobre* (thirty *quintales* of copper, equivalent to three thousand pounds), and, immediately above this second marginal note, another one that

It is not possible to know if this was the iconography of Cabrera’s painting, since the letter does not describe it.

¹⁷ AGN, *Instituciones Coloniales...* IV, 45366, Caja 26, Legajo 16, Expediente 134, fol. 164r., 1760.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, Expediente 138, fol. 170r., 1760.

reads: "This [the letter] being already sealed, Cabrera's sister sent this one to me [...] begging me to deliver ten *pesos* to his brother, hence I beg you to send them to Cabrera on his sister's account, which come to thirty-eight *pesos*, added to the twenty-eight that I requested [be given to him] last week". Given that only six days had gone by since the rector had sent the previous letter –and he might have sent more over that span of time– it is plausible to believe that he had wanted, unsuccessfully, to dedicate the canvas on Saint Ignatius's day, so he was now trying to have it finished by August 15, on Saint Stanislas' day, and, for that reason, he did not hesitate to accept Cabrera's request for another ten *pesos* to complete the commission on time. It is interesting to reflect upon the role of the artist's sister as an intermediary between the master and the commissioner.

The main subject of the letter is the order of the copper with which to "make a large bell that can be inaugurated on Saint Francis Borgia's day, the titular patron saint of this church, which lacks such precious object". This relevant piece of information might be indicating that at some point the church was rededicated –it had been originally dedicated to Saint Francis Xavier. Castañeda is *prompto*, ready, to hand the money directly to the mule driver who would carry the copper to Oaxaca or to send it *en libranza*, as a payment order. The urgency to have a bell ready on the saint's day can be explained by the fact that the Jesuit colleges were expected to have bells and altar lamps in order to announce the *buena nueva*, as the archival documents call it, that is, the good news of the commemoration of a particular Jesuit saint's day or of his canonization in Rome¹⁹. If a college could not afford to have a bell, the Jesuit authorities encouraged those who ran it to locate people who were devotees of that specific saint or guilds that wanted to take care of the expenses of the celebration.

The contents of this letter, which Castañeda finishes with the usual formula of courtesy, lead us to believe, on the one hand, that the two bells with which Father de Faria had embellished the church almost a hundred years before did not exist anymore, probably as a consequence of the earthquakes that frequently affected Oaxaca in the first decades of the eighteenth century, particularly in 1711 and 1727, and that had destroyed the previous church and part of the school building, as it has already been indicated. On the other hand, the letter confirms the Jesuits' commitment to quality, to well-designed and well-executed constructive and artistic work, since, as Castañeda indicated, he did not have to be more specific to his addressee "about the good quality of the metal". In addition, the missive shows the taste for art that is identifiable in at least some of the rectors who ran the Oaxacan complex in the last century of its existence, as well as the relative wealth that the institution seems to have enjoyed in that same period of time. Lacking additional documents, one cannot but suggest that it was during that period when the Jesuits' educational and spiritual mission was fully achieved in Oaxaca.

The canvas of Saint Stanislas finally arrived in Oaxaca on August 27, surely not in time to dedicate it on that saint's day, but no reference is made to this circumstance in Castañeda's letters, so it is plausible to believe that it was happily dedicated on a later date, to honor either Saint Stanislas or another Jesuit saint. On September 7 the rector was again writing to his correspondent in Mexico City in order to inform him of the successful arrival of the canvas. Father Montejano had sent the painting in a small box, accompanied by a reference to the expenses which the rector, on behalf of the Oaxacan complex, had incurred to that date –and which had added up to more than five hundred *pesos*. Montejano had requested that Castañeda settle the debt at his earliest convenience, since his congregation was fac-

¹⁹ Real Academia de la Historia, *Jesuitas*, 3, *Correspondencia de Jesuitas*, 9-7-1-2, 9-3799, fol. 275r., 1671.

ing financial difficulties²⁰. The rector, out of gratitude for Montejano's "generous punctuality, charitable patience, and constant favor" in satisfying his "inconveniences", promptly sent him a payment order for the entire amount, which accompanied the letter that is being analyzed, thanking him with the "greatest affection of gratitude, recognition and obligation"²¹. He concludes by indicating that he forgot to request some tin for the bell, adding that in a future letter he would let him know how much it was needed, so he could order it on his behalf. Unfortunately, it is not possible to know on which other canvases and works of art Castañeda might have invested part of those five hundred pesos, but it seems that he did not lack the necessary funds to commission additional works in the future. This, at least, is indicated in the fifth letter of the set.

Castañeda starts this letter, dated October 27, by sharing with his addressee the good news of the arrival of the copper that he had ordered a few months ago, and, after thanking him for his mediation, he formally requests six *arrobas* of fine tin—approximately one hundred and fifty pounds of the said material. With that tin, which Montejano was to send at "the first occasion available", the rector hoped to be able to finish a bell that would sound "nicely on the day of Saint Francis Xavier"²². In addition, the rector informs Montejano of the commission for "some canvases made by Cabrera as good as the [canvas of] Saint Stanislas for the beautiful altarpiece that I am finishing". The rector may be referring to one of the three retables that he had started earlier that year, although, unfortunately, the letter does not provide information on its iconographic program. Despite his high fees and the time that he took to deliver a commis-

sion, the Jesuits of Oaxaca were once again relying on Cabrera to decorate their church with works of art of a superior technical and aesthetic quality. Castañeda appears to have been so thankful for Montejano's mediation in artistic matters, that he does not only greet but "re-greets" him at the end of his missive.

Given that no other letter from Castañeda seems to have left Oaxaca between October 27 and November 10, judging by the contents of a missive that was written on November 10 it may be inferred that the retable that the rector was finishing might have been that of Saint Gertrude. Since he had requested the tin only a few days earlier and most probably it had not left Mexico City yet, he took advantage of the opportunity and ordered six additional *arrobas* of the same material. His goal was to inaugurate a bell on Saint Gertrude's day, "together with the altarpiece of the saint and the Preacher"²³. Saint Gertrude's day is celebrated on November 16, so the rector might have been unable to accomplish his goal of dedicating, or showing for the first time, an artwork on a scheduled day. Lacking documentation that could prove otherwise, we believe that this bell is the same that he had aimed to complete by Saint Francis Borgia's and Saint Francis Xavier's feast days.

Gertrude the Great, also known as Saint Gertrude of Hefta, was a German Benedictine, mystic, and theologian, whose devotion was widely promoted by the Jesuits. Although none of her numerous writings, which include a collection of *Spiritual Exercises* compiled almost three centuries before those of Saint Ignatius, were in the library of the Oaxacan complex, judging at least by the inventory of that library that was taken after the banishment,²⁴ her vast knowledge would surely have been praised by the Jesuits who taught there. Her figure was intended to exert inspiration and motivation in the stu-

²⁰ The college where he lived or one of its sodalities might have advanced the money on Castañeda's behalf, and this had put it in a delicate financial situation.

²¹ AGN, *Instituciones Coloniales...* IV, 45366, Caja 26, Legajo 16, Expediente 148, fol. 181r., 1760.

²² *Ibidem*, Expediente 166, fol. 204r., 1760.

²³ *Ibidem*, Expediente 169, fol. 207r., 1760.

²⁴ For an introductory study of this inventory see M. MELLADO, *Op. cit.*, pp. 228-232.

dents, hence the inclusion of an altarpiece in her honor in the college church, which illustrates, once again, the educational character of the art that the Jesuits commissioned for their buildings. In addition, Saint Gertrude was a notable early devotee of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, and it was thanks to the Jesuits that this devotion spread around the world. In one of her mystical visions, on the feast of Saint John the Evangelist, she was resting her head by the wounded side of Jesus and hearing the beating of His Divine Heart. She asked Saint John if he had felt these palpitations on the night of the Last Supper, and, if so, why he had never spoken of it. Saint John replied that that revelation had been reserved for subsequent ages. This episode might have inspired the iconography of the Oaxacan retable, since, as we have seen, Castañeda refers to an altarpiece "of the saint and the Preacher", that is, Saint John the Evangelist. Did Cabrera paint two separate canvases, one depicting the saint and another representing the Evangelist, or a single one? Did he illustrate the saint's vision, or did he make portraits of the two saints with their attributes? If he placed the two figures together in a single canvas, which other images by his hand decorated the retable, given that Castañeda commissioned not one but "some canvases"? Unfortunately, no material traces of these works remain in the church nowadays, but the inventory that the Spanish authorities took after the banishment sheds more light on this matter²⁵. Likewise, a painting of the saint by Cabrera's hands preserved today at the Dallas Museum of Art (Fig. 2) can give an idea of the quality and the appearance that its Oaxacan counterpart might have had²⁶.

²⁵ The altarpiece, which also featured gilded and polychrome statues of Saint Joseph and the Virgin Mary, as well as seven canvases, was gilded and contained an image of Saint Gertrude dressed in a black velvet gown, wearing a diadem, and carrying a staff and a silver heart. Unfortunately, nothing is mentioned about Cabrera's canvases. *Ibidem*, p. 204.

²⁶ This canvas could, indeed, be the one that Castañeda requested for his college. Contacted about it,

The saint, as it is often the case, is depicted with a devotional book, her writing tools, and the Sacred Heart. It is relevant to mention that, like Judah Maccabee –whose statue also graced the Oaxacan church– Saint Gertrude was also invoked for suffering souls in Purgatory, hence her inclusion in the decorative program that the Jesuits, perhaps in conjunction with the members of the sodality of the Anunciata, conceived for their institution in Oaxaca. Furthermore, Philip IV, King of Spain from 1621 to 1665, declared Saint Gertrude Patroness of the West Indies. She seems, therefore, to have been the ideal companion to the Virgin of Guadalupe that already graced the Oaxacan church. Both represented and protected the people of America, much as the Jesuits did.



▪ Fig. 2. Miguel Cabrera. *Saint Gertrude (Santa Gertrudis)*. 1763. Dallas Museum of Art, Texas, gift of Laura and Daniel D. Boeckman in honor of Dr. William Rudolph. © Dallas Museum of Art.

It is not known if the canvas, or canvases, arrived on time, or which two other

a member of the museum staff could neither confirm if the piece had been a commission nor indicate its provenance. Further research will hopefully clarify this matter.

retables were installed in the church during Castañeda's term. Archival documentation recording those events has not been located. The last missive from the rector's hand penned in 1760 was sent on December 22, and it has a certain art historical interest because the Jesuit registers the acquisition of *estampas*—that is, of prints—in it. After having gone through the costs of the tin and the copper, which came to almost a hundred pesos, the rector lists thirty-four additional pesos devoted to *novenas* and prints, which he will send without further delay to his addressee in Mexico City. These prints probably featured reproductions of religious images made by European artists and they must have been used in the church, possibly by the congregations, and in the classrooms. In fact, at the beginning of the month each member of the Anunciata was assigned a saint and to that saint the congregant had to direct all his or her prayers. Congregants were also encouraged to have images of their “monthly” saints in their houses, so they could pray in front of them on a regular basis²⁷. Due to the active role that Castañeda performed as a commissioner of artworks, he might have also made use of these prints as iconographical guides when requesting a particular painting. A letter from 1766, which will be subsequently examined, shows that on certain occasions the artists did not share his thoughts on the iconography of specific images and, in response, suggested alternative iconographies. That letter also indicates that the Jesuits “were not men who did not provide directions to the artists who worked in their churches”²⁸.

In addition, the letter sent on December 22 records the departure of the Father Provincial, who had just left Oaxaca and was now on his way to Veracruz. The visit of this Jesuit authority might have been an incentive for the rector, who in the course of

the year 1760 did what he could in order to present a well-managed and well-equipped institution²⁹.

On October 11, 1762, Castañeda was again writing to his correspondent, whom he also calls his *cirineo*, in order to request his mediation in yet another artistic matter. The rector of the Oaxacan complex, so he tells his addressee, is “at present [...] hanging in the main cloister the life of Our Blessed Father in canvases of four square *varas* each, but, since the painting is not the best in the world, and the delay and what the assistants demand from me is great, I am determined to travel to Mexico [City] and see if I will be able to have them finished, through the intervention of my beloved brother, and by the hand of Morlete, the same one who painted the canvases that three years ago you sent to me, and for that reason I beg you to ask the painter how much he will charge for each canvas, and, judging by his answer, I will make a decision. Up to now, five canvases have been completed, and ten or twelve have not been finished”³⁰.

This letter is particularly significant, because of the amount of relevant information that it provides. On the one hand, it confirms that the College of Oaxaca displayed in its principal cloister—probably the one located near the school entrance, accessible to people not directly related to the institution—a series of canvases representing the life and death of Saint Ignatius Loyola, whom Castañeda refers to as Our Holy Father. This was a customary feature in the Jesuit schools, particularly in those that were located in Hispanic territories, meant to exalt the memory and glorify the figure of Saint Ignatius, as well as to promote the Society of Jesus by telling to, or illustrating for, the general public the story of its founder. Castañeda might have used the so-called Rubens-Barbé series (1609) as an inspiration, since this set of almost eighty

²⁷ Biblioteca Nacional de España (from now on BNE), R.MICRO/30337, *Constituciones y reglas comunes a todas las congregaciones de la Virgen*, Zaragoza, 1599.

²⁸ E. MÂLE, *Op. cit.*, p. 29.

²⁹ AGN, *Instituciones Coloniales... IV*, 45366, Caja 26, Legajo 16, Expediente 182, fol. 223r., 1760.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, Caja 19, Legajo 13, Expediente 279, fol. 322r., 1762.

engravings depicting the life and death of Saint Ignatius was disseminated throughout Jesuit residences and colleges all over the world³¹. On the other hand, the missive informs us that Castañeda, unwilling to lose time, resources, and energy, and to put at risk the artistic splendor that his institution had gradually attained in the course of his term, did not hesitate to transfer the commission for the series to Juan Patricio Morlete Ruiz (1713-1772), one of the finest painters working in New Spain in the second half of the eighteenth-century and second director of the Academy of Painting. His ample corpus of work³² included portraits, landscapes, *casta* paintings and works of a religious and an allegorical nature (today lost or in the hands of private collectors)³³, although one of his favorite subjects was the representation of Saint Luis Gonzaga³⁴.

Castañeda might have relied on that occasion on local artists to complete the series, perhaps in an attempt to save time and money –it will be remembered that he had to urge the prompt delivery of the Saint Stanislaus and pay Cabrera an additional ten *pesos* for it– and to give local “talents” an opportunity. But, since they were not working as expected, he was ready to travel (or to resort) to Mexico City and negotiate, always aided by Montejano, the intervention of master Morlete. Unfortunately, it is not known

³¹ A. RODRÍGUEZ G. DE CEBALLOS, “La iconografía de San Ignacio de Loyola y los ciclos pintados de su vida en España e Hispanoamérica”, in J. PLAZAOLA (ed.), *Ignacio de Loyola y su tiempo. Congreso Internacional de Historia*, Bilbao, 1992, pp. 107-128.

³² The significant versatility and considerable output of New Spanish painters, as well as the mobility of pictures within the viceroyalty, among other themes, have been recently addressed in I. KATZEW (ed.), *Painted in Mexico, 1700-1790: Pinxit Mexici*, Exhibition Catalogue, New York, 2017.

³³ J. SANCHIZ, “El grupo familiar de Juan Gil Patricio Morlete Ruiz, pintor novohispano”, *Anales del Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas*, Vol. XXXV, nº 103, 2013, pp. 199-230.

³⁴ M. TOUSSAINT, *Arte colonial en México*, México, 1948, pp. 167-168.

if the painter accepted the commission, or if the Jesuit agreed to his price, although it is plausible that both did, since the letter also informs us that three years earlier, that is, in 1759, Morlete had completed a commission for the Oaxacan complex, although no reference as to its nature has been found. Furthermore, it is not known if the painter used the five existing canvases, retouched them, or if he made five new works, in addition to the other “ten or twelve” that had not been completed yet. The lack of references in the archival documentation –the inventory that the Spanish authorities took after the banishment does not refer to these canvases– and of material remains leaves us with many unanswered questions. It is known, nevertheless, that by December of that year of 1762 Castañeda had not heard back from Morlete.

One of the cloisters at the former Jesuit novitiate of Saint Francis Xavier, in Tepozotlán, Mexico, still features a series of large paintings depicting the life and death of Saint Ignatius (Fig. 3), the work of the Mexican painter Cristóbal de Villalpando (c. 1649-1714). Although Morlete and Villalpando had very different styles, this photograph may help to picture the way the Oaxacan set could have looked on site, given that the works that Father Castañeda commissioned were also very large –one hundred and sixty inches each– and that one of his predecessors, Father de Faria, had also decorated the walls with red ocher, as it was customary at that time.

An example of the delicacy and quality of execution with which Morlete completed his works is illustrated in this depiction of Saint Luis Gonzaga (Fig. 4), which can give an approximate idea of the way his representations of Saint Ignatius at the Oaxacan complex –if he finally completed them– might have looked. As it will be subsequently mentioned, the college church accommodated an altarpiece dedicated to the Italian Jesuit.

In a letter signed on December 6, 1762, which is significantly more extensive than the others, the rector writes in the margin



▪ Fig. 3. Cristóbal de Villalpando. *Cycle of the life of Saint Ignatius*. 1710. Cloister of the wells, former Jesuit novitiate of Saint Francis Xavier, National Museum of the Viceroyalty, Tepotzotlán, Mexico. © Adrián García, Museo Nacional del Virreinato.

that he repeats what he said in a previous missive, namely, “that, of all my requests, charity will only satisfy for me those that are not a burden to you. If you have seen the painter, I am waiting to hear about the canvases, in order to assess if it may be that they provide them there”³⁵. In this same letter he requests one hundred pounds of tin. In a previous letter, dated October 18, the rector had repeated his requests—surely among them was an update on Morlete’s canvases—and had asked his addressee for the price of the copper. He was attempting to cast a bell with which to call to Mass, since they lacked one and it was necessary to walk to another tower located far away. Was this a new bell, or the same bell that he had tried to inaugurate before? Judging by his words, that

³⁵ AGN, *Instituciones Coloniales...* IV, 45363, Caja 20, Legajo 13, Expediente 328, fol. 383r., 1762.



▪ Fig. 4. Juan Patricio Morlete Ruiz. *San Luis Gonzaga*. 18th century. National Museum of Art, Mexico. © David Álvarez Lopezlena.

bell had not been completed, or did not exist anymore, in 1762, and by the end of that year he was still requesting the necessary materials to cast one. He might have cast various bells in the course of his term, but the frequent temblors surely turned his enterprise into an arduous and frustrating endeavor. In addition, the fact that Spain was, at that time, involved in a war with England might have delayed the delivery of the copper and also increased its price—something that he hoped it would not happen.

No additional references to Morlete’s canvases have been located, but a letter dated February 12, 1766, and addressed to the Father Prefect Pedro José de Castañeda, mentions again the name of Miguel Cabrera. In it, Castañeda’s correspondent and new intermediary in Mexico City, Gaspar María Miralla, relates how he went: “To master Cabrera’s house, and in one month (may he be true to his word) he will finish the canvas; but he told me that it is not customary to depict the Virgin crowned, but that he will place some stars instead, and the Blessed Trinity will crown Our Lady; [he also told me that] it is not convenient to place Saint Gertrude

underneath Our Lady, either, so he will put her on one side, and on the other side I told him to paint Saint Rosalia, so there would not be any gap. I will make sure that he accomplishes all this with perfection"³⁶. On the one hand, the missive is particularly relevant because Castañeda is this time the addressee, so we have the opportunity to read the response from his correspondent and liaison. In addition, it informs us that another person is actively assisting him with his art commissions. Gaspar María Miralla, who lived at that time in the viceregal capital, did not hesitate to visit Cabrera in his own house and inquire about his progress, and even to suggest, on Castañeda's behalf, that he painted an image of Saint Rosalia, the patron saint of Palermo. Miralla had become a Jesuit precisely in the novitiate of Palermo (Sicily), and had spent most of his life in the missions in Mexico, before being exiled in Italy, from where he submitted, on several occasions, claims for his pension³⁷. On the other hand, the letter sheds light on the way Cabrera worked, or had to work (plausibly due to the large number of commissions that he received). Miralla relates how the painter told him that he would have the canvas of the Virgin completed in a month, to which he adds "may he be true to his word", as if indicating that Cabrera often missed his deadlines. Moreover, the missive tells us that the painter was up-to-date on the iconography of the Immaculate Conception—this was, most probably, the image that he was painting—as it was conceived in New Spain, where it was indeed not infrequent to depict her being crowned by the Holy Trinity. Examples of this convention can be seen in these eighteenth-century New Spanish renditions of the subject (Figs. 5 and 6). One of them (Fig. 5) even shows the stars above the Virgin's head that Miguel Cabrera was also going to place in the commission for the

³⁶ *Ibidem*, *Archivo Histórico de Hacienda* (1ra. Serie), 24793, Volumen 973(1), fol. 196r., 1766.

³⁷ BNE, *Manuscritos*, MSS/17595, *Documentos referentes a los jesuitas y a otros asuntos; Otras reclamaciones de jesuitas expulsos*, fols. 272r.-273r.



▪ Fig. 5. Anonymous. *Asunción y coronación de la Virgen María*. 18th century. Andrés Blaisten Collection, Mexico. © Courtesy Collection Blaisten.



▪ Fig. 6. Nicolás Enríquez. *Coronación de la Virgen*. 18th century. Andrés Blaisten Collection, Mexico. © Courtesy Collection Blaisten.

Oaxacan institution. Furthermore, the letter reveals that Cabrera had the social status, and the knowledge, as an artist to disagree with or even to correct those who paid for his works and wanted to comment on their iconography, and to have a say in how those works should be not only composed but also displayed. As the reader may remember, this is the letter that illustrates how Castañeda's thoughts on the iconography of specific images were not necessarily shared by the artists who were commissioned to create them and who, as a result, suggested alternative options. Finally, the letter confirms, on the one hand, the Jesuits' promotion of Marian iconography, and, on the other hand, their constant search for models of virtue and piety with which to inspire their students, as well as their support for the Counter-Reformation movement, hence Miralla's suggestion of gracing the Oaxacan church with a canvas of Saint Rosalia, a Sicilian saint whose cult was equally disseminated by Benedictines and Jesuits. She was invoked against the plague and other infectious illnesses, and to overcome difficulties, with special intensity during the Counter-Reformation. Her remains, carried out around the streets of Palermo in 1624, were believed to have ended the plague that beset the city. Cabrera would have enough time to complete this commission, Miralla might have thought, since the saint's feast was celebrated on September 4, and he probably visited the master in January or February. Lacking material remains of Cabrera's canvas, and any certainty that he ever completed it, this rendition of the saint by Anthony Van Dyck (Fig. 7) could assist in recreating it³⁸. Van Dyck, who was member of the sodality of the Blessed Virgin Mary that met at the professed house of the Jesuits in Antwerp³⁹, painted several canvases depicting episodes of the saint's life, being the first in codifying her iconography.

³⁸ The 1767 inventory does not register a canvas of Saint Rosalia, but it often lists paintings without specifying their titles or their iconography, so it is still feasible to believe that it was finally executed.

³⁹ E. MÂLE, *Op. cit.*, p. 27.



▪ Fig. 7. Anthony van Dyck. *Saint Rosalie in Glory*. 1624. The Menil Collection, Houston, Texas. © The Menil Collection.

One of the representational models that he conceived showed the anchorite in front of the cave –where two angels had led her and where she had died alone– the moment she was being carried to Heaven by a cloud surrounded by angels, while one of them crowned her with a wreath of roses, as can be seen in Fig. 7. Another iconographical model, much less frequent, showed the Virgin Mary introducing the saint to the Holy Trinity. Miralla told his interlocutor that Cabrera would paint the Virgin Mary being crowned by the Holy Trinity. Most surely, Van Dyck's works were known in Mexico City through prints. Could have Miralla seen one of them, specifically an image of Saint Rosalia being presented by the Virgin Mary to the Holy Trinity, related it to the iconography that Cabrera was describing, and suggested it for the Jesuit church of Oaxaca? The iconographical model of the saint being presented by the Virgin Mary to the Holy Trinity would have certainly made a suitable pendant with that of the Virgin Mary being crowned by the same holy triad.

Although no other correspondence sent to or received by rector Castañeda has been

found, a document titled "Account of the condition of the estates of the College of the Society of Jesus of Oaxaca in this year of 1763" sheds more light on the artistic accomplishments of Castañeda's term⁴⁰. It registers the existence of two retables, one dedicated to "our Holy Father" –probably Saint Ignatius, since that is how his brethren called him, and the 1767 inventory recorded the existence of a retable dedicated to the Society's founder– and another one dedicated to Saint Gertrude. It appears that out of the three retables that Castañeda was intending to complete in April of 1760, only two of them had been built and decorated by 1763, although the third one might have been completed years later. In addition, the document mentions four wall silver lamps for the altarpiece of Our Lady of Loreto, and six additional ones for the altarpiece of Saint Luis Gonzaga. Who did create these altarpieces, and when? No references to them have been found, with the exception of their inclusion in the 1767 inventory⁴¹. The account also records a new pulpit, banister and canopy made of gilded wood, as well as architectural interventions in the rector's office and the *general* or auditorium for the celebration of literary plays –it does not specify if these spaces were renovated or built anew–.

Our Lady of Loreto is one of the most important devotions associated with the Society of Jesus. It originated in a medieval tradition, which recounted that when Mameluke soldiers invaded Palestine the habitation of the Virgin Mary at the time of the Annunciation was transferred miraculously from Nazareth to Dalmatia by angels. The Jesuit Juan Bautista Zappa (1651-1694) introduced the devotion to New Spain in 1677. Soon afterwards, there were chapels and altarpieces devoted to Our Lady of Loreto in virtually every Jesuit school and residence. The Jesuits often represented the episode of the transportation of the Holy

House due to its pedagogical and spiritual value⁴². The Holy House was considered the real House of God and, as Saint Ignatius advised, when meditating different passages of the Gospel one should "see the place" where the object of the meditation took place, as if one were an artist, employing all the senses, since this "composition of place" would increase one's understanding of the events of the life of Jesus, and, eventually, it would facilitate a real encounter with the Lord.

Saint Luis Gonzaga (1568-1591) was an Italian Jesuit priest. Pope Benedict XIII canonized him in 1726 and declared him patron saint of young students. His origins were aristocratic and he received military and court training, but he renounced his wealth and a successful career in order to live an ascetic and short existence assisting victims of the plague that ravaged Rome in 1590-1591. In the temporary hospital that his brethren established next to the Church of the Gesù he contracted the illness, and soon afterwards, at age twenty-three, he died. Gonzaga, whose cult, like that of Saint Stanislas, was particularly active in Rome, where he is also buried, is commonly depicted as a young man, wearing a black cassock and a surplice (see Fig. 1), and carrying or surrounded by at least one of his symbols or attributes: a lily, a cross, a skull, a rosary, and, sometimes, a plague-infested man, who holds on to him like a child would hold on to his mother. The presence of his effigy in Oaxaca, like that of Saint Stanislas, seems appropriate. It would have undoubtedly served as a role model for the young students who populated the classrooms and attended Mass at the church, as well as for the members of the sodalities and the parishioners who frequented the temple, and it would have stressed the Jesuits' commitment to Catholicism and against heresy and idolatry.

As the preceding pages have shown, Castañeda's term as rector was productive from an artistic point of view. He witnessed

⁴⁰ AGN, *Instituciones Coloniales, Jesuitas I*, Legajo 1-35, Expediente 87, fol. 198r., 1763.

⁴¹ M. MELLADO, *Op. cit.*, pp. 204-205 and 217-220.

⁴² L. RIVERA, "La devoción jesuita a la Santa Casa de Loreto", *Boletín Guadalupano*, nº 93, 2008, pp. 10-12.

the completion of the church and commissioned Miguel Cabrera several works. Likewise, canvases by Juan Patricio Morlete arrived in the college, and he inquired whether the same artist would be available to complete a series of large paintings representing the life of Saint Ignatius to be displayed in one of the cloisters. He also requested several altarpieces and he supervised architectural interventions in his office and in the auditorium, but no material remains of his accomplishments have survived. He might have acquired more works of art and ornaments, since the inventory that was taken after the expulsion recorded the existence of additional altarpieces, canvases, sculptures, and ornaments –some of them found in his bedroom and office-. The expulsion prevented his successor, Father Nicolás de Calatayud –who, in 1766, had just commissioned architect and *retablo* designer Felipe de Ureña to complete an altarpiece– from culminating what would have been a successful stage of the institution's artistic history.

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