

## THE MARIAN ICON AND VISUAL COMMUNICATION IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY CARACAS

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### Summary

The Marian Icon and Visual Communication reflect an authentic cohesion when analyzing religious, political and social systems. Art in its various representations and discourse conjugate the same idea: two elements that are concentrated in eighteenth-century Caracas, particularly in the image of the Immaculate Conception and in the representation of the Throne across the seas personified in officials appointed to exercise political and economic power.

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## Introduction

The Province of Venezuela, like the whole of America, was connected to the Catholic Church, a universal institution which, together with the colonizing power, laid the foundations, without ceasing to mimic the aboriginal encounter, of an acrisolated social system that is proper to it.

That northern region of South America, depopulated and with low resources, suddenly experienced an economic improvement, exporting mainly land products. The Crown, alert to such changes, established bodies such as the Intendencia, the Audiencia and the creation, finally, of the Captaincy General of Venezuela in 1777. This political and administrative recognition brought with it progress that even benefited artistic manifestations. It is precisely there where our intention resides; the communicational power that penetrates our senses and the iconic image of the Immaculate Conception that reveals the impure.

The development and cohabitation of the Caracas society presents a modality of social status in whose roles the Mantuan whites stand out, given the public positions granted by the prevailing dominion and the economic power obtained in many opportunities with the support of officials, appointed from the European peninsula. The Church on its part, conscious of the power of the symbols, directs a fraction of its resources to provide itself with artistic and cultural elements that allow the transmission of the beatific and, at the same time, controlling message.

In this sense, the Church emerged as the main contractor of brush artists, sculptors and gilders, as well as printers of books, prints and commemorative items. Although the city did not have a School of Art at that time, were, , artists trained in observation and practice who ratified the representative value of the consecrated European masters of the time, together with their own ability to capture in the appropriate medium the feeling of their emotions, as well as that of the provincial population. We refer to some of those singular virtuosos of whom testimonies of their precious skills are still preserved: The Landaeta and very specially Juan Pedro López.

## Research Intentions:

### General

To generate a theoretical construct on the relationship between the iconographic representation of the Immaculate Conception, the discourse and the adaptation of the Caracas cultural identity to the Marian cult, as well as its dogmatic development within the Catholic tradition, between the 17th and 18th centuries.

### Specific

To explore in the historical and social context of the Province of Venezuela the iconic Marian representation and the social cohesion of the colonial society, in relation to the social classes shaped by the peninsular purposes, and the economic boom in the 18th century.

To value the artistic representation of the Immaculate Virgin in colonial art, showing how these works reflect and contribute to the cultural identity of Caracas, as well as the Church-throne coalition in the Captaincy General of Venezuela.

### Method

For the present research, the *socioconstructivist* paradigm will be used. This paradigm, according to Kenneth Gergen (1985), “basically aims to elucidate the processes by which people manage to describe, explain and, ultimately, account for the world in which they live” (Gergen, 1985, in Ibáñez, 2011, pp. 56). This study is directed towards the understanding that some phenomena cannot be reduced to a simple or linear explanation, but require the holistic analysis of the aspects involved in the phenomenon and the need to approach it from the interdisciplinary nature of the sciences (Martínez, 2015); taking into account that, to explain, we not only resort to the psychological view, but also to the philosophical and socioeconomic view.

In addition, it will be carried out within the framework of the hermeneutic method, whose use is fundamental in qualitative research, especially when the aim is to understand experiences, actions and human behavior from different perspectives (Martínez, 2015). In this way, the experiences and meanings expressed by the participants with respect to the topic around which this study will be developed will be considered, in combination with the preconceptions of the researcher, since they influence the dialectic interaction dynamics that arises between the two.

As Hernández et al. (2014) refer, in qualitative research, all these “realities” converge, and these realities emerge, at the same time, from the changes that are taking place in the research process was carried out during the course of the research process, yielding data inherent to the essence of the problem explored.

## Marian Icon and Visual Communication

We know of the existence of this eighteenth-century painter Juan Pedro Lopez, thanks to the extensive exploratory work of Don Alfredo Boulton, art critic, historian and essayist considered one of the prominent Venezuelans of the twentieth century (Boulton, 1971). López painted on several occasions the Virgin Mary in the invocation of the Immaculate Conception, interpreting with his natural gift not only the aesthetic, but also the mentality of the society of the Captaincy General; that is to say, the religious-moral understanding, as well as the civic-moral of his time through canvases.

According to the data provided by the Dictionary of the History of Venezuela (1997), the plastic artist was born in Caracas in 1724, son of parents from the Canary Islands (Tenerife). As a curious historiographic detail, one of the daughters of the couple, Ana Petrona, married Bartolomé Bello and they were parents of Andrés Bello, glory of our letters.

Juan Pedro's first work commitment was in the baptistery of the Candelaria ; today that baptismal font has been lost track of, but the fulfillment of the commission is on record because there he met the gilder Juan Álvarez Carneiro and the carpenter Francisco de León Quintana. With them he achieved an effective friendship, which led to a partnership that, in 1755, executed the altarpiece of the main sacristy of the cathedral of Caracas. In that cathedral space, Juan Pedro López showed the quality of his brush by unraveling the image of the Immaculate Conception, the four angels, Saint Rose of Lima and Saint John Nepomuk. After some time, he surprises the city again with the harmony of his palette, when he depicts the Immaculate Conception on the altar of the main sacristy of the church, facing the main square.

However, López's work was not limited to painting. In 1777, he sculpted the image of the brotherhood of St. Joseph for the cathedral, and a model of a symbolic statue of faith cast in bronze, which can still be seen in the tower of the emblematic building. A master of pictorial techniques, Juan Pedro López served as an appraiser of private collections of those "big cocoas" who delighted in works of art. And, to that group he frequented, called "mantuanos" although with the nickname of "blancos de orilla"), he successfully offered his detailed sensibility; this is the case of a portrait of Doña Luisa Bolívar, great aunt of the Liberator.

In this sense, it is understandable how one of the castes, this small group of Mantuan whites, those chosen by the Diocesan Synod of 1687 and qualified as *Fathers of the Family* (Ziegler, 2005), guardians of Christian morality and models to follow with the example of their selfless lives, protected by the Crown and the Church, achieved political and economic successes that allowed them to acquire works by the master painter.

The most successful of the "tastes" is linked to painting and other artistic manifestations related to religious beliefs; public images proliferate, observed and watched by the ecclesiastical authorities to avoid any unseemly slip of the artist. At the same time, the desire arose to possess in the privacy of one's home a canvas or a sculpted image, in front of which one could kneel to ask for the Lord's favors. Undoubtedly, for these acquisitions a surplus of capital was

necessary. This monetary capacity that allowed the hiring of artists was generally characteristic of the “Mantuan caste”, also imbued with the baroque culture.

Baroque culture permeated the entire society, and those who could not afford the costs of a reputed painter, the Church was already in charge of providing a stamp or printed prayer to maintain the “order” of ideas; in other words, pedagogy and social control. The intervention in the collection and archiving of documentation, product of the administration of sacraments: birth, baptism, marriage, death, etc., until the presidency of Guzmán Blanco (Civil Registry), provided a source of power over individualities.

In the private sphere, devotion to the components of the ecclesiastical liturgy guaranteed earthly transit and an afterlife; images facilitate this religious experience.

Now, the images of the Virgin, the recitation of the rosary and other religious elements acted in the public and private sphere as the Council had foreseen, and promptly supported by the provincial Synod. The visual transmission of messages together with the support of the passing of the tenths and their intersections, plus the prayers and the power of the pulpit, indoctrinated the archetype of the good Christian who had to be equally faithful to the State. The perfect image of the Mother of God represented in herself the ecclesiastical institution and the model in her Immaculate Conception.

The image of the Immaculate Conception of Mary, and especially that of the aforementioned painter López, was accepted as an identifier of the white Mantuan population of the city of Caracas. For this caste that emerged from the confusion of ethnicities and the privileges granted in the power game, the image of the Virgin without blemish, of moral and spiritual cleanliness represented honor and success (Ziegler, 2005).

It is worth considering that, in the history of the capital Province, things at the beginning of the three hundred years of the colony did not go according to what was expressed in the previous paragraph. Religious art and its discourse penetrated the new world, impregnating the aborigines after the “discovery”, parallel to the consequences of the action of the Reformation proposed by Martin Luther.

The Vatican confronted the Protestant aftermath with the Counter-Reformation.<sup>1</sup> This movement promoted by the Roman Curia was supported by King Philip II who, relying on theologians from the University of Salamanca, presented various theories for the purification of the clergy and to achieve the following goals thus the revival of the origins of Christianity. Without a doubt, images and the purifying message were the axis of such a strategy.

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1 According to Frías Valenzuela (1937): “The Counter-Reformation. The movement that took place within the Catholic Church as a result of the Reformation and during it has been designated with the name of counter-reformation, although it would be more appropriate to call it Catholic reform. In , during it the Church reformed itself to confront Protestantism and to reconquer some countries that had embraced heresy” (pp. 103-104).



The Council of Trent, held in 1543, tried to recover the lost spaces by citing obedience to the Pope and the reading of the Vulgate, the Latin translation elaborated by St. Jerome, as the authentic Bible and not the translation of the German reformer. In one of the cardinal points of the conciliar deliberations, the image versus the word is stimulated for the reconquest of the lost parishioners. The counter-reformationist impact is assimilated in Spain and America; that is why each sermon or homily is accompanied by a symbolic picture that, after a , serves as a model for those who vibrate with the brush.

In relation to the above, the peninsular metropolis, with the conciliar movement, recovered in turn the legitimate values in the artistic field, taking up again the “classical civilizations” as models to follow in order to support the altar-throne nexus and overcome the moving Lutheranism that affected the Church and the State; restored, consequently, to the thought that conceived the king as God’s anointed.

The capital of the Captaincy General of Venezuela 1777, assumes as part of its general structure, the European Catholic current destined to the salvation of souls. The social castes were formed in this scenario, based in large part on the economic bonanza, based on agricultural exports, as already mentioned. Under the influence of the reigning Crown, the European peninsulars who migrated to the provincial colony with political and institutional positions, brought in their baggage the orientation represented in religious art and apocalyptic discourse. White peninsulars who infected those born in American lands with the satisfaction of owning works of art, which, by the way, were well guarded by the ecclesiastical authorities to avoid any unseemly slip of the artist, as described above. The practices forged in the synodal constitutions had to be maintained, probably that is the reason why the prelates decided to keep unalterable the fabric of a people, which remained stable and obedient to the peninsular monarchy.

Based on the , it can be inferred how a social group adopts an attitude and the image of the Immaculate Conception, as an identifying element of its class. Honor, notes Inés Quintero (2002), which distinguished good men and which allowed establishing distinctions in society, was a symbol of belonging; losing this condition represented the non-fulfillment of the qualification of Father of the Family, and the consequent dishonor of the offspring.

The identifying emblem sketched by Juan Pedro López constituted the insignia of the caste that adopted it. The image of the Immaculate Virgin represented not only the contemplative conviction, but also the origin of the privileges and “connection” with the throne. The Creole elite, identified with the plastic genius of the artist, assumed the Baroque dynamic, against the Enlightened Despotism. Thus, the Mantuanos observed with concern the social reforms that strengthened the lower castes stimulated by the Bourbon regime.

Consequently, it is worth highlighting that the Royal Decree issued in 1794 fueled the traditional disputes between white creoles and peninsulars, a detail that gave pause to the brown-skinned and mestizos in their quest for social advancement. In addition, the royal decree protected foundlings by granting them legal legitimacy and the possibility of being whitened.

A year later, in 1795, the Law of Gracias al Sacar (Pietro Figueroa, 2009)<sup>2</sup> was passed, which established the possibility of acquiring legitimacy of origin and, consequently, enjoying the status of “person of honor”. The aforementioned law adds in the short , how mulatos and pardos, with the payment of a small sum, could acquire the status of whites. It is not difficult to imagine the bewilderment of the parents (Pietro Figueroa, 2009).

The baroque principles of the Creole social elite were shaken. Years of struggle to gain the privileges of the peninsular whites and now the contingency of whitening the lower castes. Undoubtedly, this was an attempt, according to those *hot-blooded minds*, against the stability of the kingdom. The Crown, for its part, tried to appease the pressure that had been initiated with social mobility.

However, it is necessary to bring up the baroque principles on which the Mantuan society was based and which provided it with security. Thus, José Antonio Maravall (1986) points out: “The baroque world organized its resources to conserve and strengthen the order of traditional society, based on a regime of privileges, and crowned by the form of government of the absolute- estamental monarchy” (p. 29). The Creole aristocracy rejected the royal decrees with all its might; of course, not only because of the Marian symbol that identified them, but also because of the imminent danger of the massification of privileges that could be granted.

Within this framework, in addition, it is easy to deduce that not all the inhabitants of the city of Caracas had a budget surplus to acquire a work of unquestionable quality that would allow them to kneel in the privacy of their homes and ask for favors from outside; it was only possible because of its cost for a Mantuan caste imbued with the baroque culture.

But that was what the Church was for, the great contractor of the best and most valued exhibitors of Catholic religious art. The temples became centers for exhibiting the best images and, very importantly, “for all the public”. In this regard, it is interesting to read José Gil Fortoul when he relates the following: “In Venezuela, all people who were not of pure race were usually called pardos, a caste that at the end of the colony made up half of the total population. On Sundays and feast days, a vivid picture of the castes could be seen in the temples of Caracas: the Cathedral was preferably attended by whites, the Church of Candelaria by the Canary Islanders, Altagracia by the pardos, and the Hermitage of San Mauricio by the blacks” (Gil Fortoul, 1890, pp.48-59).

Based on the above, it can be deduced that in the public sphere, the fictitious social divisions were not solid. On the contrary, the Church, with its lively discourse from the pulpit, influenced by religious representations, exercised a controlling function sustained, in, by

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2 According to Prieto Figueroa (2009): “The “Gracias al Sacar” (Thanks to the Sacar) decree, issued on June 3, 1793 and ratified on February 19, 1795, must be related to the social significance progressively acquired by the pardos and free blacks in the Venezuelan colonial society and to the renovating orientation in a bourgeois sense that, inspired by the enlightened despotism, was felt in the last decade of the XVIII century in some aspects of the policies of the Spanish State. And the leveling process towards civil equality, an aspiration of the pardos, was favored by that certificate that allowed the colored population to acquire, through the payment of an amount of money, the rights reserved until then to the notable whites” (p. 167).

the archived documentation concerning the administration of sacraments; a position that was maintained until the creation of the Civil Registry.

The importance of this analysis is justified in the cohesive work presented by the Church in a society divided into social classes sustained by political and economic power. This casual union is achieved through visual communication and the registration of an instructive and mandatory discourse. The maternal figure, free of all guilt and, in short, progenitor of Christ, was always the most appropriate for the transmission of a reconciliatory and relational message in a divided community. , the Caracas identity is configured around the icon of the Immaculate Conception. Let us remember that at a certain moment it gave its name to the city: “Inmaculada Concepción de Santiago de León de Caracas” (Immaculate Conception of Santiago de León of Caracas). The Virgin reflects not only European influences, but also local elements that reveal how the Caracas population appropriated this image to narrate their own history and religious experience.

The Marian symbol fulfills an essential referential function, as it develops notions of purity, redemption and protection, typical of Christianity in colonial Caracas. In this way, the visual construction created by Juan Pedro López echoes the beliefs and socio-cultural values of that time, making the images not only preconfigure the religious sense, but also introduce, at the same time, a level of social significance for the collective Caracas identity. Even the use of colors, gestures, attributes and elements to represent the Virgin is not random, but is composed of a series of conventions learned and adopted culturally, originating in Europe; already demonstrated in previous paragraphs, where the graphic foundations of Christianity are still valid and rigorous.

This is what Peirce (1974) himself maintains when he describes the nexus between the symbol and the sign as conventionally defined; that is, in the case of the Immaculate Conception, its features and peculiarities traced in the paintings can be interpreted as cultural codes that refer to much more complex truths about the aspirations of Caracas society. They evoke shared principles and values about faith and devotion, which were transmitted in the first instance by the Catholic Church in the Captaincy General. Thus, the icon of the Virgin acted as a mirror that reflected individual and social aspirations.

Balbuena's (2014) theory of Symbolic Representation is oriented to identify how meaning is constructed through symbolic representation. It is not about the transmission of the message, exclusively what we see, but in the interpretation with which we shape our understanding of the world.

In order for the symbolic meaning to emerge, the author defines three interrelated dimensions. The first of these alludes to the visual elements that make up the image, referring to shapes, lines, colours, etc., whose arrangement creates a visual language that influences our perception. She calls this dimension Formal.

The second dimension goes beyond sensory perception and delves into cultural and social significance. Icons for the research at hand have, for example, significance in our history and cultural heritage. That is why it is registered as a dimension of Meaning.

The Sociocultural Context dimension encompasses the moment in which the image is presented, as well as the cultural beliefs and values of the observer. Thus, the warning of the symbol may have different meanings according to the culture and the time.

The importance of this theory lies in the understanding of the symbolism and the visual effect it entails. This understanding helps to penetrate the underlying messages of the images and to question, if, the values they promote. The conjunction and balance in artist's imagination guides him not only to the conception of a design that is aesthetically pleasing, but also full of meaning. The messages thus emitted provoke associative emotions around certain values. Visual communication, in this sense, facilitates the understanding of complex concepts of an extramental order.

## Conclusion

In relation to the subject of visual communication, we can point out how the iconic representations made by Juan Pedro López reaffirm, as art experts (such as Alfredo Boulton and Carlos Federico Duarte) testify, the extraordinary qualities of the Immaculate Conception. The evangelizing work of the Church in America was to culturally homogenize the colonized territories in the religious aspect; it is there where the theories that analyze the power of the images as faithful companion of the word or intentional speech point. The Caracas of the XVIII century is no stranger to this ecclesiastical impulse that well knew how to take advantage of the enunciated painter in his Marian interpretations. The virgin images with their baroque characteristics, adopted by a social class, manifest the rejection of the *borbonidad*, circumstance that uneasy the relation Church-throne.

It is crucial, on the other hand, to consider the correct deduction that the Church draws from the agglutinating power of the Marian icon when promoting the profusion of artistic representations of Lopez's quality in the capital's temples. Attendees from different social strata could freely contemplate the beauty interpreted by the expert in light and shadow. The Marian icon, the Immaculate Conception, is the cohesive phenomenon of a developing society.

## Recommendations

The relationship between art, religion and identity has been the subject of interest in numerous contexts, but in the case of Caracas during the colonial period, many aspects remain to be investigated. This interdisciplinary approach will allow for greater interaction between art history, social history and cultural anthropology. Hence, analyzing the iconographic representation of the Immaculate Conception, as a personification of colonial faith and religiosity, will shed light

on how devotion to the Virgin could be linked to the processes of collective identity, and how this figure transcended the religious to become a cultural reference.

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