# Notes on Latin American Baroque and Neoclassical Humanities
# 1600 – 1810

## I. Baroque in Mexico: General Characteristics

In Mexico the Baroque period ushers in a burst of color with polychrome plasterwork, red volcanic stone mixed with white limestone, and colorfully glazed tile work (*azulejos*) and ceramic pottery. The effect is that of exaggerated extremes mixed with organic sensuality. Surprises, effects, and novelties for their own sake dominate all kinds of arts from common crafts to high literature and music. During the 17th century we find mistilineal shapes (curves and straight forms), three-lobed arches in architecture, and even inverted pyramids for pilasters. In addition, as is suggested by the notion of Baroque humanities wherever it appears (Latin America, Spain, Italy, etc.), Mexican baroque humanities demonstrate a profusion of adornment, complicated façades, abundant foliage, plaster darts, crossings, coilings, scrolls, and conical shapes mixed with traditional shapes.

During the 17th century especially, Mexican creoles (privileged native-born Mexicans of European ancestry) try to immortalize both their Iberian forbears and the Spanish conquistadors, whose fame they idealize and exalt. Latin American syncretism of forms and content are particularly prevalent in Mexico: their humanities give no rest to the beholders eyes or mind. In addition, however, in these baroque arts we find a symbiosis of purely creole baroque tastes and mestizo popular arts: pre-Columbian intertwined serpents, exotic birds (i.e., the quetzal bird), suns, moons, enchanted interiors, roasted meats, swarms of heads, carved foliage, drowned devils, tropical fruit, plumed military headdresses, celestial Indian courts, crucifixes on corn husks (i.e., native Mayan culture), Indiatids (sculpted figures of indigenous Mexicans used as columns; e.g., on the **Montejo mansion in Mérida**). In fact, one could say that, according to Mexican Baroque humanities, God (god) is seen as a native Mexican. Think in particular of the pervasive influence of the cult of the **Virgen de Guadalupe** in Mexican Catholic religious beliefs and practices.

The term *horror vacui* is well suited to the Mexican Baroque. Mexico's greatest architect during this period is Lorenzo Rodríguez (1704-1774). He designed the Sagrario chapel (1749-1769), which sits next to the Catedral Metropolitana on the Zócalo in the center of Mexico City. This chapel is a perfect example of baroque disequilibrium; its airy filigree, florid carvings, and imaginative choir screen are designed specifically to dazzle the eyes, the mind, and the spirit. This style is called Churrigueresque (*churrigueresco*), from the Spanish architect José Benito Churriguera (1665-1725), because it is the last and extreme development of baroque architectural style.

In terms of the visual arts, whereas sculptures and paintings were either imported directly from Spain or they were calqued or imitated directly from Spanish models and styles during the 16th century, in the 17th century, for the most part, paintings were still brought into Mexico from Spain while sculpture was somewhat freer, in that indigenous relief decoration was permitted and enjoyed. For example, friezes depict local fruit, flora, fauna, and physiognomies including Aztec virgins. In fact, the baroque spirit is so deeply rooted in Mexican consciousness that it develops its own style beyond anything seen in the metropolis, Spain. Wealthy Mexican creoles are able to afford to commission products of the humanities on their own. Herein, then, Latin American nationalism arises. But it will not come to fruition until the early 19th century.

In Mexican baroque literature, three figures stand out: Bernardo de Balbuena (1561-1627), Carlos Sigüenza y Góngora (1645-1700), and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (1648-1695). The last two of these figures have their own descriptions on this website. As for Bernardo de Balbuena, his major literary masterpiece deserves mention here: *La grandeza mexicana* (Mexican Grandeur, 1604). In this long and elegant poem, he describes the colonial city of Mexico. He gives a profusion of details about the complicated and beautiful city as it was about 80 years after it was conquered from the Aztecs and as it had grown into the gracious capital of the viceroyalty of New Spain (Nueva España). In flowing, lyrical verses, he gives lush word pictures of the city's geography, climate, surroundings, architecture, flora, fauna, and human residents. The poem is both high Renaissance and early baroque in style, yet, as is suggested by its Renaissance qualities, it has an elegant simplicity; at the same time, however, it contains very complicated baroque metaphors, word plays (*conceptismo*), and a vocabulary that shows off his erudition (*culteranismo*). Overall, *La grandeza mexicana* demonstrated early Mexicans pride in their new, mixed, semi-independent culture.

## II. Baroque in Central America and Caribbean

In these regions there are fewer baroque extremes than one finds in Mexico. There is less use of polychrome painting; white is used more often; there is less stone carving; the architecture uses more wood; and towers are thicker and wider.

In Central America one finds motifs typical of the region: palm leaves, stylized flowers, ears of corn, and the like.

Early in the baroque Colonial period, Antigua, Guatemala, was a major cultural center that rivaled Mexico City, Lima and Cuzco in Perú, Potosí in Bolivia, and Ouro Preto in Brazil. Sadly, Antigua was destroyed many times by earthquakes, and it was almost entirely abandoned. Its population declined from a peak population of 60,000 in 1770s to 35,000 now, and it is growing once again since it has been declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The image below gives an idea of some of the past glories of colonial architecture in Antigua; for a virtual tour of Antigua, click on this image:

Two other sites that had prime examples of colonial architecture and art are Nicaragua and Panamá. Sadly, the English pirate Henry Morgan destroyed the greatest early Panamanian architecture in 1671, whereas Nicaragua's beautiful church monuments were destroyed by the American filibusterer William Walker in the 1850s.

As one recalls from earlier discussions of the period of Spanish discovery and conquest in Cuba, mestizo art does not take root on the largest of the islands of the Caribbean. This is due to the fact that native peoples were eliminated from the island; hence, there were no indigenous crafts artisans, nor was there an indigenous labor force, who were the craftsmen who worked local themes into churches and other buildings. In Cuba, therefore, one finds more Spanish influence. The same is true in Puerto Rico. Among the most notable buildings in San Juan, Puerto Rico, is the Castillo de San Felipe del Morro, which is an elaborate defensive fortification with a number of forts, castles, bastions, spiked walls, guardhouses, subterranean passages, barracks, jails, prisons, and more.

## III. The Baroque in Quito, Ecuador, and Nueva Granada (Colombian and Venezuela)

The first Latin American school for the arts was created in Quito in 1534. This particular school and others that followed later throughout Ecuador and Nueva Granada (New Granada) trained many native artists and artisans, but they all followed Spanish European patterns. As a result, their art includes abundance, richness, and variety. As an added element, Spanish Franciscan missionaries brought Asian elements to these Latin American regions. As you might expect, then, artists and craftmen followed rigorous codes for the color they used and for styles of the vestments they created for statues of the saints and for the Catholic clergymen. Three of the most important names in these regions are the architect Fray (Brother) Antonio Rodríguez of Guápulo (near Quito, Ecuador) and two women, Sor María Estefanía de San José and Sor Magdalena.

## IV. The Baroque in Perú and Chile

In Perú during the two centuries covered on this page, architecture shows signs of a Gothic revival. However, in Cuzco one continues to find a strong native substratum of styles and ideas. This means that we find layering and syncretism in the Peruvian humanities during this period. The entire city is created on two levels, figuratively and architecturally: Inca stone walls were used on the bottom as the foundations and bases for Spanish-style houses. The lower half, then, gives a sense of heaviness, darkness, and solidity. Above the stone foundations one finds typical Spanish windows with ornamental wrought-iron bars, and on the roof curved red Spanish tiles. Architecture in Arequipa and Cuzco have superb examples of this fusion of the Spanish baroque style with indigenous bases. You may link through the following image for an architectural tour of Cuzco.

In the seventeenth century, what we have been identifying as syncretism continued with what Gauvin Alexander Bailey, an expert in Peruvian art and architectural history, has called the "Andean hybrid baroque."[1] He uses this term instead of either syncretism, which we are using in this textbook, or "Mestizo Style," which other experts often use, for these reasons: ""Andean hybrid baroque," a term that I think is most accurate, he says, "encompasses a wide range of meanings … including the style's geographic location and its cultural admixture, but it is more useful for an art historical study because it relates more specifically to how this culture fits into an international stylistic movement" (Bailey, p. 2). The Andean hybrid baroque, this expert says, began in Arequipa, Perú, in the 1660s and spread throughout the general Inca region until the native rebellions in the late seventeen hundreds. For examples of this style see the church of the Compañía (Jesuit) in Arequipa:

By contrast with Arequipa and Cuzco, Lima, which was the center of Spanish colonial and power in South America, shows the face of a more Europeanized city. Most of the sculptors and carvers were imported directly from Spain for work in the viceregal capital. Some of the finest wood carving on church choir stalls, for example, is found in Lima due to the importation of skilled carvers from Andalucía, Spain. Higher up in the Andes, in Alto Perú, however, one finds mixed (i.e., *mestizo*) forms and styles. The fabulously rich silver mining city of Potosí in present-day Bolivia exemplifies the fusion of European and indigenous elements.

In literature, three writers stand out: Felipe Guamán Pomo de Ayala (ca. 1530-ca. 1615), the Inca Garcilaso de la Vega (1539-1616), and Juan del Valle y Caviedes

(1652-1697). Guaman Pomo de Ayala is known for the prose chronicle, *El Primer Nueva Coronica y Buen Gobierno* (The First New Chronicle and Good Government), written in 1615. It had disappeared for three centurias until it was rediscovered in the 1908. It takes the form of a thousand-page letter directed to the king. In it he describes the terrible situation of his own Quechua people, the indigenous Peruvians. Guamán Pomo's Spanish style is highly influenced by Quechua; however, he also shows that he knew some Latin.

The Inca Garcilaso de la Vega, who was born in Cuzco, was the illegitimate son of a Spanish conquistador and an Inca princess. One can say that the Inca Garcilaso is truly significant for Latin American humanities because he is the first major writer born in the Americas. With him, then, Latin American literature per se begins. He blends both a thorough knowledge of Spanish culture and Inca culture. On his father's side he was related to the family of the great Spanish Renaissance writer, Garcilaso de la Vega, and from his mother he learned Quechua and the traditions of her Inca people. He produced three major works: *La Florida* (1605), which chronicles Hernando de Soto's expedition to Florida. He translated a major Renaissance work by León Hebreo, *Dialoghi d'Amore* (Dialogues of Love), from Italian to Spanish. And his masterpiece is the *Comenatarios reales* (The Royal Commentaries, 1609 and 1617). Writing in Spain in the best 16$^{th}$ century Spanish style, in this third work he tells about the glories of Inca history, language, religion, and humanities.

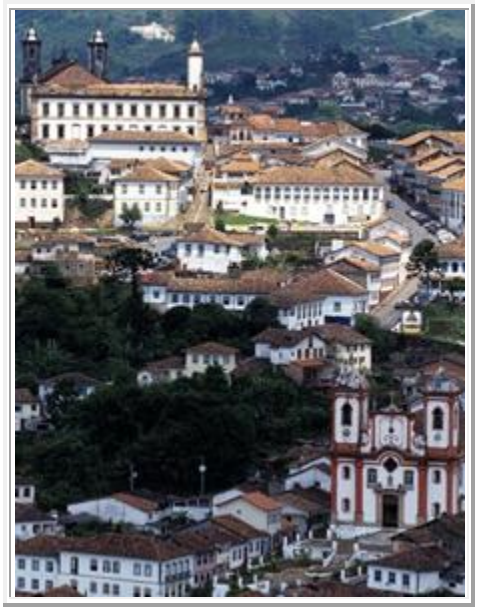
Writing in Lima in the peak of the Spanish-American Baroque period, Valle y Caviedes lived a life of debauchery: women, wine, and gambling. He wrote biting satire against medical doctors in the genres of poetry, ballads, festive poems, and epigrams. All of his works were published posthumously in a work title *Diente del Parnaso* (Tooth of Parnassus). In addition, he wrote dramatic and comic essays in the style of the great Spanish baroque writer Francisco de Quevedo, sonnets, and religious poetry. In a "Carta" (letter) to Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, he informs us of his pride in his achievements, the fact that he was self-taught and that he held no superstitions. He died of alcoholism, but, in a word, he was probably the best colonial Peruvian poet.

In Chile during the Baroque period, there were no major developments in the humanities. Rather, Chile developed rapidly during the Neoclassical period in the 18$^{th}$ century.

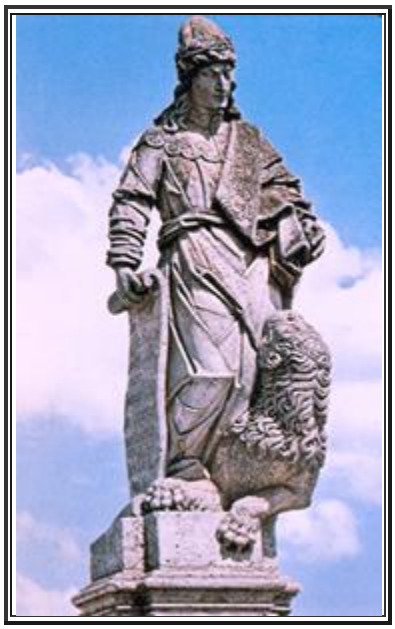
## V. The Baroque in Brazil

Generally speaking, Brazilian colonial baroque style shows a tendency toward more sensuality than in other regions of Latin America: more seductive angels and feminine attributes as ogled by fauns with lewd expressions, for example. Also, in Brazil, we see new forms with mulatto and African values, plus there is a

tendency toward grace side by side with frivolity. This is due to the rococo (a development of the Italian and French Baroque especially) styles imported by the imperial Portuguese court (see the Brazilian information page for the period from 1549 to 1807). It is important to note that the Portuguese in Brazil did not use a native labor force or artisans in either architecture or art; hence, there is no conflict between native forms and content on the one hand and Portuguese elements from the Baroque period. In fact, what one finds in Brazil is one of the most extreme baroque developments in all of Latin America. This includes an element of "tropicalization" (i.e., the use of tropically exuberant flora and fauna) in the 18th century leading to incredible interior ornamentation including dazzling church altars. Immense prosperity came Portuguese Brazil in 1693 when gold was discovered at Ouro Preto. Here is a standard picture of downtown Ouro Preto:



As a result, Asian artisans and craftsmen were imported into Brazil from Portuguese possessions in Asia. These laborers in the field of art and architecture added both a new dynamism and an Asian flavor to regional styles, especially in the interior of the colony. In terms of sculpture and painting, the Brazilian Baroque period finds a profusion of frescoes. In addition, there are two figures that stand out: Manuel da Costa Ataíde, who was the greatest artist of Minas Gerais. He is known especially for his paintings of *negros* (African Brazilians) and mulattoes on high altars, ceilings, and stations of the cross. The other great figure of the Brazilian Baroque is Aleijadinho (1730-1814): for him, see the separate web page in our **Baroque Index**.



In fine, the so-called Golden Age of Brazilian baroque art covers the years from 1750-1807. In this last period of the Portuguese imperial colony in Brazil we see an integration of visual and spatial arts in addition to excellent polychrome woodcarving.

## VI. Late 18th Century

The neoclassicism that was so prevalent in France throughout the 18th century entered Latin America late in the 18th century, as, indeed, it did also in Spain and Portugal. Among such influences were the ideas of (1) independence from the metropolis (mother country), (2) a move away from Iberian cultural and baroque styles and ideas, and (3) imitation of French elements of art and ideology. Much of French neoclassicism entered Latin America not directly from France, but rather mediated and transferred indirectly through the United States during the first years of American (i.e., U.S.A.) independence (1776-1810). What happened in Latin America is fairly complex, however. Land-holding Creoles (well-to-do *criollos*: non-*mestizo* and non-native Latin Americans) led various independence movements, which were also, much like those in the U.S.A., movements that asserted cultural, political, and national maturity. The highly developed cultural forces of "Baroque Latin America" rejected independence movements, but "Neoclassical Latin America" favored independence. These two Latin Americas (a huge oversimplification, but roughly useful as an introductory notion) existed all over the continent, but there were also regions that were dominated by one force or the other depending on the differences in local or region histories. While one finds

imported French architects throughout Latin America, nevertheless, the highest degree of neoclassical influence occurred in Mexico and Brazil. The Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San Carlos (royal academy of fine arts) was opened in Mexico City in 1785, for example, imitation of the royal academies of France and its own imitation in Spain. The academy's full name was Academia de las Tres Nobles Artes de San Carlos de la Nueva España (academy of the three noble arts of Saint Charles of New Spain). It was named in honor of Spain's and Spanish-America's king, Carlos IV, who was a patron of Neoclassicism. The lead architect was Antonio González Velázquez.

The most renowned sculptor in Mexico was Manuel Tolsá (Spain, 1757-Mexico, 1825). He became director of this Neoclassical academy in1790. In addition to his work as the Academy's director, he supervised draining the lake surrounding Mexico City, he reforested the city's downtown park (la Alameda Central), he created furniture and military cannons, he opened a bath house and a carriage factory, and he built a ceramics kiln.

In South America's Southern Cone (*el cono sur*: Chile, Argentina, Uruguay), neoclassical influence was easily accepted due to its distance from baroque-dominated Perú. This is because there were no strong baroque movements either in the Southern Cone or in Venezuela. Remember that the Viceroyalties of Nueva Granada and Río de la Plata were established in 1740 and 1776, respectively. In other words, these South American regions became recognized as independent entities when Neoclassicism was beginning to dominate the humanities in Europe and Latin America.

Toward the end of the 18$^{th}$ century, intellectuals in Latin America began to make the transition from Neoclassicism to Romanticism. They began to go beyond a strict base in reason and rationalism toward sentimentalism.

Instead of thinking about the world as a mechanism, they began to venerate nature and its organic processes. Nevertheless, neoclassical political themes still resonate during this transitional phase. Among these themes are liberalism in which state and religious absolutism are opposed; and humans (men and women) are dignified and given independence; liberty and progress are valued. Literature is no longer confined in a priori academic and intellectual rules. It is no longer either a rhetorical exercise or a frivolous entertainment; rather literature is taken very seriously. Writers become independent professionals who feel responsible for improving the welfare of all mankind: they try to become akin to poet-priests. Two of the most important writers during the transitions times between the end of the neoclassical period and beginning of the Age of Romanticism are José Joaquín Fernández de Lizardi (México, 1776-1827) and Andrés Bello (Venezuela, 1781-1865). For brief commentaries on each of these two writers, click on the following images:

**Lizardi**

**Bello**

## VI. End of European Colonial Hegemony, 1807-1810

In brief, there were five principal reasons why France, Spain, and Portugal began to lose their American colonies in the 18th and 19th centuries.

1. France lost its five colonies (Canada, Acadia, Hudson Bay, Newfoundland, Louisiana) included in its North American territories of Nouvelle-France (New France) (a) when it lost the French and Indian War and the Seven Years' War to England in 1763; (b) when it sold Louisiana to the United States of America in 1803; and when it lost Haiti's War of Independence in 1804.

2. Napoleon Bonaparte invaded Spain in 1808, causing Latin American Creoles to fight against the French-controlled mother country (i.e., for independence from Napoleon's Spain and against the new king, José Napoleón, in Spain).
3. The liberal Spanish constitution of promulgated by French-influenced Spanish intellectuals in 1810 caused conservative Latin American Creoles to reject colonial control by Spain. At the same time, the new Spanish Bourbon king, Fernando VII, was taken prisoner by Napoleon Bonaparte in 1810, again causing Latin American Creoles to rebel against a Spain that was no longer free.
4. In general, powerful and rich Latin American Creoles realized that they possessed basic cultural patterns different from cultural norms that had been and were then prevalent in Europe.
5. In 1807 the royal court of Portugal left Europe (i.e., the capital of Lisboa / Lisbon, Portugal), established itself in and near Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, and then, in 1821, returned to Lisbon, thereby leaving its giant colony of Brazil free. Brazil, therefore, did not have to fight a war of independence.


[1] Gauvin Alexander Bailey, *The Andean Hybrid Baroque; Convergent Cultures in the Churches of Colonial Peru*. Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010.