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Review/Reseña

Kelly Donahue-Wallace, *Art and Architecture of Viceregal Latin America, 1521–1821*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2008.

Tools for Teaching Colonial Art History to U.S. Audiences

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It is quite telling of the cultural politics informing academic practices that, although the formation of the study of colonial art in mid-nineteenth-century Mexico was coeval with the development of medieval art history in Europe—in particular France—the study of the American material has consistently lagged in terms of scholarly activity and general familiarity in the United States, as in Europe, with few notable exceptions.

In spite of a consistent stream of Mexican scholarship for at least the past century, as well as a steadily growing awareness in the U.S., what is variably labeled Spanish Colonial, Colonial Latin American, or Viceregal Art History continues to be an area which is misunderstood and in need of further examination. The latter is ironic, given the contiguous nature of American regions and histories, as well as the richness and complexity of the material, not to mention its significance to the larger global sphere in terms of discussions of modernity, economics, and (post) colonialism, among other things.

For those of us who not only research but, most importantly, teach colonial art history at the college and graduate level in the U.S., a number of challenges present themselves when designing a course meant to include informative yet accessible scholarly publications for what is primarily an English-speaking student audience. A lack of suitable introductory texts on colonial art has meant hunting for anthologized articles, exhibition catalogue essays, and perhaps chapter excerpts from books on related subjects in a variety of disciplines in order to cobble together a useful reading list. Although potentially frustrating, this approach, when done thoughtfully, can provide students with a wide range of scholarly perspectives and methods, thus enriching their exposure to both the content and practice of colonial art historical study. However, it would be difficult to deny that it can be advantageous to have at least one text as an organizational anchor for a class, especially at the undergraduate level.

Immensely useful although dated, the one exception to a lack of survey texts in English had been Manuel Toussaint's classic work, *Colonial Art in Mexico*, the translation of which was published in 1967. More recently, we have seen a series of publications in English that deal with the history of art in Latin America and the arts of the Colonial period. These texts vary widely in terms of information, organizational presentation, and pedagogical effectiveness but with each successive publication, progress is evident. The most recent effort is Kelly Donahue-Wallace's introductory survey, *Art and Architecture of Viceregal Latin America, 1521–1821*.

Donahue-Wallace should be commended for not simply presenting yet another laundry list of objects accompanied by formal analysis and

perhaps some references to social history. She presents a carefully edited body of works, which she examines in depth in relation to historical events, key figures, patronage, social and political significance, and correspondences to larger cultural practices. Given that this book is meant to be a college level introduction for students who presumably know little next to nothing about the subject, she inevitably retains certain organizational elements inherent in diachronic surveys. The book thus possesses an overall chronological order within which she addresses several large themes, such as architecture and sculpture at the missions, sixteenth-century painting, colonial cities, religious architecture, religious art, and secular painting, among others. This presentation style renders legible what could be an overwhelming amount of material for the uninitiated. Donahue-Wallace states up front that the book's organization and "tone" reflect her applied methods in the classroom. I find this statement refreshing in its honesty and unapologetic stance regarding its pedagogic perspective. Although other surveys may possess greater breadth and/or present historical and cultural information in an, at times, incisive manner, they can be difficult to use as teaching tools for a variety of reasons, including challenges caused by the text's thematic selection and its arrangement.

Kelly Donahue-Wallace completed her Ph.D. in Spanish Colonial Art History at the University of New Mexico, an institution with an established reputation in Latin American Studies. While at New Mexico, she trained with scholars dedicated to the study of Pre-Hispanic and Colonial arts and architecture in a program noted for its Arts of the Americas emphasis. The University of New Mexico, furthermore, is located in a region of the country with a dominant Hispanic presence, where colonial cultural traditions continue to inform social life, given the area's former status as a northern province of the viceroyalty of New Spain. As such, the resources, perspectives, and cultural experiences to which Donahue-Wallace had access as a graduate student of colonial art history were incomparable influences in terms of forming her research interests and in fostering her critical approach. Currently on the faculty at the University of North Texas, Donahue-Wallace is widely recognized for her

exceptional work on colonial prints and printmaking. This is one of many areas lamentably under-investigated, in spite of the ubiquity and importance during this period of works on paper, both imported from Europe and locally produced. In light of her formative experiences and her attributes as an able scholar and teacher, Donahue-Wallace is an ideal person to author an introduction to Colonial art history.

In researching and writing the book, Donahue-Wallace consulted with many top senior and emerging scholars in the field. She thus incorporates references in the text to newer research with a more critical approach to the study of this material, evident, for instance, in her recognition of transcultural processes and the negotiated nature of colonial cultural production, wherein the indigenous presence and its myriad contributions to the colonial matrix are examined in their complexity beyond references to some generalized process of *mestizaje*. In the preface, she articulates a concern regarding the unreflective application of traditional (i.e. European) art historical period or stylistic labels in the study of colonial material, a position with which I, too, agree. Although she does not advocate the complete dismissal of such qualifying terminology, she advises caution with the uncritical deployment of Eurocentric labels as interpretive tools in the examination of material produced under very different historical and cultural circumstances, such as seen in the Americas. I concur that one should look at the colonial material not as some derivative extension of Spanish or European cultural forms, but as valid localized expressions independent of any identifiable sources since references or comparisons to the latter in the past typically have stressed European cultural superiority or Spain's dominance in the Americas, almost always resulting in the misapprehension of colonial arts and their qualification as provincial, uninventive, and/or flawed copies of European metropolitan forms and practices. Ultimately, such methods may tell us more about contemporary politics than of the historical past. Donahue-Wallace states that, "The more significant information in my opinion is what role the building, painting, or sculpture played in its own context." Given the inherent pitfalls in allowing ethnocentric or nationalist impulses

to govern the design, methods, and interpretation of historical and cultural research, her stated intentions are much appreciated.

This emphasis on the local dimensions of artistic production is illustrated, for instance, when noting regional differences in viceregal sculptural practices. Donahue-Wallace writes: “Lacking a handy workforce of stone sculptors or a population expecting to see figural carvings on holy buildings, the friars [in Peru] did not seek to outfit their churches with iconographic programs in a vernacular sculptural style as their counterparts in New Spain did.” Here, she alludes to the formative influence of pre-existing native Andean concepts and expressions on the artistic forms brought from the Iberian peninsula. In the end, such adaptations yielded artistic forms that represent new types of cultural productions. Although many scholars may be drawn to identifying models and tracing the development of colonial works from foreign or native sources, such works of art are constructions unique to the American experience of that time and place, i.e. they are Peruvian, Novo-Hispanic, or American, and in some cases, perhaps even constitutive of early modernity. Such an observation underlines the fact that New Spain and Peru were distinct, in spite of typically being considered under the umbrella terms “colonial” or “viceregal,” qualifying adjectives that often motivate the facile conclusion that the Spanish Americas were some monolithic, static cultural entity. Beyond the limited presence of a global imperial administration and an ideally universal Catholicism, each region in the Americas was unique due to distinctions in climate, topography, indigenous populations, extant cultural forms, immigration patterns from the Iberian peninsula, Asia, and Africa, and events as they transpired locally over time. Donahue-Wallace acknowledges this fact by considering the works of art she selected in terms of their dialogic placement in their particular synchronic context. An element that strengthens this approach is the inclusion of excerpts from primary documents. For example, in her chapter on secular painting circa 1600–1800, she inserts a translation of an inventory from 1681, which provides an insight into the personal possessions and domestic life of a member of Mexico City’s social elite, doña Antonia de Villareal. The inventory lists the woman’s collection of paintings, including their frames,

and her expensive furnishings. After reading this document and considering it in relation to the chapter's discussion, the reader acquires a stronger sense of the nature of colonial domestic spaces, their contents, and possibly, of the inhabitants' social activities. Rather than simply providing a description or interpretation of the works of art, this type of information adds a spatial and/or performative dimension to our understanding of colonial paintings as objects or commodities, which were commissioned by patrons and produced by artists, then placed in particular settings where they had a subsequent social life.

In spite of my enthusiastic evaluation of this publication, I should note that there are several aspects of Donahue-Wallace's survey with which I take issue. It goes without saying that no survey exists which is exhaustive or satisfies every taste or point of view. Although this is understood, I believe there are certain elements in the text that deserve commentary, one of these being language usage. For example, the use of "Latin America" as a historical reference to a colonial territory necessitates re-examination since, as an anachronistic application of a category of later manufacture, it contributes to a misunderstanding of the actual range of colonial geopolitical territories, e.g. the national boundaries of contemporary Mexico do not accurately reflect the expansive geography of New Spain, which included the Western and Southwestern regions of the U.S., all of modern day Mexico, and the northern half of what is today Central America. Furthermore, the continued use of this label fosters the illusion that the United States is somehow disconnected from its southern neighbors, a historical and actual fallacy if one looks not only at the actual territory constituting New Spain but also at the fact that in terms of demographics, language, culture, and geography. The United States is and has been part of the larger so-called Latin American cultural spectrum, at the very least, since the early nineteenth-century, if not earlier. Another issue regarding terminology concerns the confusing and problematic use of the word "colonist" to refer to some unspecified inhabitant of places like Mexico City or Lima. Were the viceroyalties actually colonies? If so, who was colonized, exactly, when, and by whom? What about the descendants of Iberian or European settlers? Were they colonists? What about descendants of Asian

or African arrivals, and the miscegenated castes? Are colonists only the recently arrived Peninsulars? What is important to understand is that, although from an imperial European perspective, New Spain, Peru, and the other American regions were subject territories whose main value lay in their function as sources for raw materials, labor, and revenue, as a result of taxation and transoceanic trade, the Western Hemisphere became the home for millions of locally born people for whom places like Mexico City or Lima were a center. To the vast majority of Americans, Spain and the king existed only in the imaginary, hence the need for regular public performances that attempted to reinforce ideas of authority, hierarchy, and social order. We need to be consistently conscious of and exact in our language use since it is in language that many problems of interpretation are located and perpetuated. Anachronistic uses of terms, such as those that signify modern nationalistic or contemporary identity politics, in my opinion, are to be either avoided or critically and judiciously applied.

At this point, I must state that it has long been a problem that, in terms of the larger discipline of Art History, Latin America continues to occupy a marginal position in comparison to areas such as Classical or Renaissance art, in spite of mounting interest in the subject, exemplified by recent U.S. exhibitions. Within the categories that are widely accepted as comprising Latin American art history—Pre-Hispanic, Colonial, and Modern—there is a hierarchy, largely determined, in my opinion, by a “western” interest in the exotic otherness of indigenous cultures, on one hand, and a desire by certain segments of the American population to claim native affiliations and ancestral land rights, on the other. Interest in the arts of pre-contact cultures (i.e. Maya, primarily, then Aztec and Inka) is then followed by a focus on so-called Modern Latin American art, at least those areas of Latin American art production that seem to correspond to a canonical modernity from a Western European and U.S. perspective. In relation to this ancient-modern polarity, the colonial material is remarkably inconspicuous, a phenomenon tied, in part, to the cultural politics that unfolded in nineteenth-century Mexico City, when the first art history, concentrated on the Old Mexican School of Painting, was initiated in the Academy of San Carlos in response to a reinvigorated nationalist agenda. In

the study of colonial art, perhaps due to Mexico's bellwether role in such cultural developments, New Spain is privileged, and in particular, the central region in and around Mexico City, suggesting that within the novohispanic context, the so-called provinces require more attention than they are currently receiving, again, a result of internal cultural politics and of responses to the national border dividing the region. A broader historical phenomenon I believe informs the status of colonial art history in the U.S. is that when imperial power shifted from southern to northern Europe during the eighteenth- and nineteenth-centuries, earlier historical movements marking Hispanic directed cultural developments were displaced in the historical imagination of the anglicized West, particularly those accomplishments seen as pivotal in guiding the emergence of the modern world.

A number of hierarchies seem to structure, then, the location and perceived value of colonial art, consequently determining general responses to it. One dimension is geo-political, i.e., Madrid is generally viewed as peripheral in Europe to other metropolitan centers, such as Paris or Rome, and Mexico City is seen as peripheral to Madrid, as a city in a distant American viceroyalty. And in the American context, areas outside of the novohispanic viceregal capital, such as the northern region of *Nuevo México*, are further marginalized, given their relation to the imperial center and cultural assumptions generated by such a spatial configuration. Another dimension, as noted earlier, is discipline-specific to historical narrative construction. In their attempts to emulate European historical developments as a way of locating Mexico on par with countries such as France or Italy, elite Mexicans in nineteenth-century Mexico City generated a tri-partite historical configuration, whereby the Aztec past was meant to be synonymous with the ancient Classical world, the Colonial or viceregal period with the Medieval, and the contemporary setting with the modern world of its time. The irony in the development of this arrangement is that, although colonial art history was the first art history produced in Mexico, it is the least known in the U.S., unlike the already noted areas of Pre-Hispanic and Modern Latin American art. Similarly, although more attention has been gradually directed to Peru in recent years, a focus on

colonial Mexico leads the way, rendering peripheral other regions such as the viceroyalties of *Nueva Granada* and *Río de la Plata*, or the captaincy general of Guatemala, the Caribbean region, and the Philippines—the latter presenting an interesting case since this Pacific region fell under the jurisdiction of New Spain for a period of time. As such, one finds local interpretations of imported forms, exemplified by the image of Santiago in relief over the main entrance to the fortified port city of Manila or the relief of St. Christopher on the façade of a parish church in the Iloilo province. In the chapter on religious art 1600–1785, such references are omitted entirely, even when Donahue-Wallace discusses depictions of Santiago de Matamoros in New Spain and Peru.

If we look at the title of the book, *Art and Architecture of Viceregal Latin America, 1521–1821*, we cannot help but note that the dates delimiting the study are years that specifically identify historical events as they are understood to have unfolded in New Spain-Mexico. Donahue-Wallace does acknowledge that the conquest in Peru occurred later, an observation that calls attention to the fact that any dates pertaining to first encounters, conquest, exploration, and settlement differ for each Spanish territory in the Americas, including the termination of viceregal control, which for some regions takes place post-1821. Furthermore, as a survey that maps the arrival of Europeans and the subsequent emergence of early modern societies in the Indo-Hispanic Americas, it is curious that she begins the narrative with the conquest of Mexico, as is so often done. It is important that we, as colonial scholars, impart to our students the fact that Iberian colonial expansion did not begin with the conquest of Mexico, but with the foundation of the first European city in the Americas, Santo Domingo, established in 1496 on what was then the island of Hispaniola, today Haiti and the Dominican Republic. It is in this particular location, as in other Caribbean sites, that the first stages of Spain's imperial expansion began to take form and precedents were set, particularly in terms of the urban and architectural foundations of what came to characterize Iberian colonialism. In spite of a chapter on colonial cities, Donahue-Wallace omits those very important urban developments of the early decades preceding the conquest.

Although a defense to this critique can be that since it is the period of viceregal rule that determines the limits of the study and thus of what is included, it does not sufficiently justify or explain why these early phases of Iberian incursion, exploration, and settlement are left out since they are a foundation on which the rest of the viceregal period is built. Once the viceroyalty of New Spain is founded with Mexico City as its imperial capital, the island settlements are relegated to secondary ports; however, should this diminish the recognition of their foundational significance or their important function throughout the viceregal period? As one of my students, Paul Barrett Niell, recently noted in an article on Santo Domingo, the marginalization of this region can be explained in part by what seems to be a continued perception of the placelessness of the Caribbean islands and/or their lack of presence since they were not primary imperial centers. It is true that other regions in the Americas outside of New Spain are considered in this text, but does the focus on the conquest as the beginning of the colonial process, along with Mexico-specific historical dates as defining markers for the historical limits of the book, then not continue to privilege Mexico on some level? If this is merely a reflection of pre-existing patterns in Colonial Art Historical practice with its deficiencies, preferences, and biases, should it not be addressed and corrected?

As a scholar interested in the late colonial period, one other problem I note in Donahue-Wallace's text is the weak treatment of the late viceregal period, i.e. the Academy of San Carlos, Neo-Classicism, and the Independence period. The late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-centuries are a fascinating and significant yet little studied period in the Spanish Americas, in terms of the effects of the Bourbon reforms, local responses to such economically and politically driven policies, the gradual emergence of modern nationalisms, and the territorial developments that occurred, not only with Bourbon reconfigurations of the viceregal territories, but as Spain's dominion in the Americas was threatened by the encroachment of the British and French, and then, the nascent yet rapidly expanding United States. The state of this material in the final chapter of the survey, however, may simply mirror the lacuna this late period represents in colonial art history and a lack of substantial research on the subject.

Surprisingly, Donahue-Wallace disparages what she describes as “later nationalist writings that declared the uniquely American features of colonial objects.” I suggest a reconsideration of the latter position by which I mean that, although we should be careful with retroactively imposing late modern ideas of nationalism in our interpretation of the historical past when such ideas were nonexistent or were irrelevant, we can not escape the fact that from the very beginning of European exploration and settlement, forms and practices brought over from across the Atlantic had to be reconfigured in order to adapt to and function in American physical, social, and mental environments. Through such processes, motivated by environmental adaptation and/or transcultural interactions, new expressions began to develop. This observation does not imply some sense of nationalism, as we understand it today, but it suggests the inarguable development of early modern American social and cultural realities. The fact that many inhabitants of the Americas during the viceregal period considered themselves vassals under the Spanish king does not negate the equally important fact that regional consciousnesses emerged very early, as they had on the Iberian peninsula, and must be taken into account as precursors that set the stage as precedents and preconditions over time for later events that come to characterize (Latin) American societies, politics, and cultural forms. When Donahue-Wallace uses such terms as “colonial situation” or refers to creole customs and tastes as “unique,” it is this “American” experience to which she is referring. There is nothing wrong with using the term American to qualify cultural developments during the so-called colonial period as long as one is aware that this is not a nationalistic reference (an assumption owed to the United States’ cooptation of the adjective as a reference to its own national identity), at least not until the mid-to-late eighteenth century, but to a particular hemispheric, regional experience, which, culturally, was clearly not Spanish or European.

A significant paradigm shift needs to be promoted if the study of earlier American histories is to develop in a constructive manner. Is the main objective to simply keep adding new information to a pre-existing body of material or is there a need to critically reconsider the perspectives

and methods with which such material is examined? Furthermore, from which subjective position are we writing about the colonial? We are not in Spain looking at the Americas across the Atlantic. Most if not all of us who write about this material more often than not take the Eurocentric imperial perspective when framing the Americas as peripheral to the Iberian metropole, perhaps a common response given the normally elitist nature of art production and of historical documentation. Even when we try to examine this material with a critical awareness of ethnocentric approaches and imperialistic hierarchies, we continue to treat the American regions as marginal, which, from other perspectives, such as the indigenous and perhaps the creole, they were not. If we step back and look at the global *mise-en-scène* during this period, the possibility of new perspectives emerges—e.g. politically, in the early modern colonial world, Madrid was a center; however, geographically and economically, it was peripheral. Mexico City emerges as a center, given its physical location, administrative and symbolic power, markets and consumerism, and in its sheer size and cosmopolitan character.

Perhaps my positions and critiques will be seen by some as radical or unwarranted in an evaluation of this type of survey. However, where are such questions or discussions to take place? If an aim indeed is to present a topical treatment of this subject matter, instead of replicating approaches which have been increasingly scrutinized, why not begin teaching early modern Ibero-American colonial art history with such perspectives already framing the material? I must reiterate that Donahue-Wallace and I coincide on much concerning the manner in which the study of viceregal or colonial histories and arts is conducted, just as it is probable that the author might agree with my observations although it may not come across in the text. Any questions I may have stem from my academic interests as a scholar of colonial visual cultures; however, let me be clear in noting that as a teacher of college students in the U.S., I find this book to be a timely and relevant publication, particularly in relation to its recent and few predecessors, which, if not substandard in their treatment of the colonial material, are difficult if not impossible to teach from. With the classroom in mind, Donahue-Wallace has written a user friendly, effective pedagogical tool.

The organization of the book into chronologically arranged, media specific chapters provides a practical framework for an introductory course where lectures and readings not only correspond but follow a legible progression. The text's accessible language, dense with information, facilitates the translation of complex ideas without diluting them. I had been anticipating this book for several months and was pleased when it was released. I assigned it in my colonial survey this semester and it has been a tremendous asset to my students; as such, I plan on continuing to use it. Although such an introductory text can take any number of forms, depending on the author's background, perspective, and objectives, Donahue-Wallace has crafted what I feel is the best survey of colonial art history to date. Consequently, I not only praise her accomplishment, I highly recommend this book to anyone, expert and non-expert alike, who teaches or plans on teaching such a class. Kelly Donahue-Wallace's book not only represents a positive development in the teaching of colonial art history but in its scholarly practice, as well.