The Construction of Poblano Identity in Colonial Art and Architecture: Talavera Pottery and Cathedral Architecture in Puebla, Mexico, 16th - 18th Centuries

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Abstract

During colonization in the 16th century both the Spanish and indigenous population underwent a dramatic cultural change. Puebla, Mexico is a unique city to discover the layers of identity because a different approach the Spanish decided to pursue to build its society. As Mexico’s first industrialized city, it is also the first Mexican city that was not built upon existing indigenous civilization. Because of this difference in cultural assimilation, Poblanos consisted of indigenous people and Spanish encomenderos who were organized together at concurrent times. Through cathedral architecture and Talavera pottery, an ambiguous sense of this identity is created. Cathedral architecture offers a window into how the church used shared symbols of the sun and moon between Christianity and Aztec beliefs to peacefully assimilate the two cultures. This may have proven not to be the most effective method of converting the indigenous population but nevertheless offers the modern reader one of the methods used in merging the two cultures. Talavera pottery in Puebla becomes a staple of the city’s art craft which holds its roots in both indigenous and Spanish production. What is underneath the Spanish decorative style is ancient pottery techniques that convey the message of two cultures fused together to create a distinct, Poblano identity. Visually, the styles are characteristic of Spanish Baroque, with an underlying subtle tribute to Mesoamerica’s ancient past. This research takes a look into the possibilities of these two art forms presenting a communication bridge between two very different worlds with some shared roots.

Introduction

Art in Puebla, Mexico presents a rich history of what once was an uninhabited land to a culture overshadowed by Colonial New Spain. When the Spanish established the city of Puebla in 1531, it became a stopping point between Mexico's most important port cities, Veracruz and Mexico City. Puebla’s founder was fray Julian Garcés who wanted to help improve the social conditions and eliminate Amerindian exploitation from the Spanish in Veracruz. Puebla was not built upon an existing indigenous community as Mexico City was, so its establishment brought together Spanish conquistadors and indigenous people to cultivate the land. As one of the first industrialized cities of Mexico, Puebla's colonial history is preserved within its downtown district where colonial architecture and its famous Talavera pottery are concentrated. These two elements identify Puebla as a dual-identified culture: neither indigenous nor European but both, a hybrid culture. This research will present several architectural elements that reflect this idea of a hybrid culture including the Nuestra Senora de los Remedios in Cholula, the Cathedral of Puebla and the Cathedral of Santo Domingo. Talavera pottery represents a hybrid culture in a more subtle way; its technique is specific to the area of Cholula where artisans made pottery the same way for many generations before the Spanish Conquest. Beneath the glaze and paint of Talavera pottery is where the indigenous art lies. Spanish painting techniques and the Talavera color palette decorate each piece to cover its indigenous origins.

Hybridity stems from the Edward Said's studies into the Orient and the Occident, or non-Western Europe and Western Europe, respectively. Said’s research on the Orient is considered to be one of the founding theories in post-colonialism. Although his studies concentrate on the effects of Asia and the Middle East on Western culture, Orientalism can be broadened to many cultures around the world that experience imperialistic intervention. In Orientalism, we are reminded of the notion that the productivity of colonization left Europe with a stronger sense of its own identity set against the Orient. As a result, post colonization left Puebla a hybridized blend of these two
cultures, creating an uncertainty of whether Poblanos derive from indigenous roots or purely Spanish. Puebla during the 16th through 18th centuries has now become both Orient and Occident, constructing an ambiguous culture of identity seen in cathedral Architecture and Talavera pottery of the 16th through 18th centuries. Poblano cathedrals and Talavera pottery create an eclectic identity amidst the ambiguity through evidence of subtle, indigenous beliefs about life and their ancient gods within a dominant Spanish culture.

According to Merriam-Webster's dictionary, the basics of identity mean several things: a sameness of essential or generic character in different instances or sameness in all that constitutes the objective reality of a thing. It has also been described as oneness: the distinguishing character or personality of an individual or as individuality being the relation established by psychological identification. A mathematical definition of additive identity is described in terms as an element (as 0 in the set of all integers under addition or 1 in the set of positive integers under multiplication) that leaves any element of the set to which it belongs unchanged when combined with it by a specified operation. This is to suggest that the Spanish Crown is the set 0 or 1 to be unchanged as it assimilated into Mesoamerican culture. This research is not intended to disarm the credibility of mathematical definitions of identity but rather to prove a point about the nature of identity in Puebla. While the intention was to force indigenous groups to assimilate into Spanish culture, what is seen in Puebla is a marriage of both. It is evident that Colonial Spanish culture dominates Poblano art through its cathedrals and pottery. However, there are subtle elements of ancient Aztec culture that can be seen primarily through architecture as well as Talavera pottery if the viewer knew its technique. This suggests that Spanish conquistadors quietly assimilated into indigenous culture as well as indigenous people into theirs.

In Orientalism, we can begin to understand that the Spanish crown had a will or intention to understand the indigenous culture as seen through such works of art as casta paintings (See Figure 1). Casta paintings are a series of paintings by Spanish artists depicting the various ‘racial’ intermarriages and the names given to the produced children. They were always displayed in a hierarchical order with Spanish-Spanish parents as its highest form, Spanish-Indian usually second, as so forth. The paintings were typically created as Spanish souvenirs to bring back to the Iberian Peninsula, in order to convey how the indigenous were assimilating to the Spanish and not reversed. As a contemporary academic tradition, we then analyze what these intentions were and how they affected Mesoamerica. What the mathematical definition has to offer to Post-Colonial theories is the possibility that Western imperialistic intervention may have hoped that the result is an unchanged set of Spanish colonial ideals. According to Post-Colonial theorists, the set in fact does change. Western Europe during the 16th century was developing its own ideas of what the Eastern and Western world were and one of the objectives of exploring the Americas was to preserve these societies by implementing European civilization. Thus, the desired result was to leave the Spanish (the set) unchanged, and Mesoamericans ‘civilized’ as Spanish citizens of New Spain. Puebla's identity then becomes characterized by these elements coming from the Spanish influence, Baroque architecture, indigenous pottery and European pottery decoration, as a hybridized, mixed identity. The set inevitably had to change and as a whole, the identity of architecture becomes that of ancient Aztec beliefs of their gods of the sun and moon and Christianity. Talavera pottery reflects these ideas in its ancient techniques decorated in the European style. Talavera’s connection with religion was Puebla’s monasteries and its initiation to bring European pottery decoration to Puebla and Cholula. It merges these two religious institutions and it is a hybridized religion that greatly identifies Puebla. Talavera pottery and Poblano architecture are connected with Christianity as it superimposes ancient beliefs and makes it seem as though Mesoamerica succumbed to Christianity. It leaves behind only a trace of a civilization that once worshipped and sacrificed to gods of the sun and moon and has now been overcome by a more powerful religion.

This particular type of hybrid identity does not necessarily apply to other parts of Mexico during the 16th through 18th centuries because Puebla began as an experimental colony, unlike Mexico City (ancient Technoittlan) that destroyed an existing Aztec city and superimposed a Spanish colony. Puebla was the Spanish Crown's solution to desired social change during a time when new Spanish settlers in Tlaxcala (a former stop-point between Mexico City and Veracruz, its main shipping port) were unsuccessfully adapting with the natives in the New World. The Spanish conquistadors were given encomienda, to satisfy their demands of receiving reward for conquering Mexico. As encomenderos they served as landlords to a group of indigenous people who cultivated the land and gave tribute to him in the form of goods and food, later in the next century, the tribute was to be paid with money. In subsequent to the physical development of Puebla, the city concentrated on developing a Poblano culture through its architecture and Talavera pottery in the 16th through 18th centuries.

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2 Ibid.

A Brief History of Puebla

The most well renowned name in the conquest of Mexico is Hernán Cortés. In one of several voyages to the New World, Cortes marched his way through the shores of Veracruz, which would become Mexico’s most important port city in 1519 and remains so today. Traveling through the region of Tlaxcala, he encountered a community of indigenous peoples and acquired them as allies as his plans to march through Technotitlan (the capital of the Aztec empire) were underway. The conquest of the Aztec empire occurred mainly through the early 16th century and although the Spanish Crown would attribute this seemingly effortless conquest to their military strength, historians in recent studies have found more revealing information about the epidemic diseases that wiped out almost entire villages. Other research has contributed ideas of inter-tribal warfare as another factor.

Amidst the adventures of Cortés, the Crown left the region of Tlaxcala in disarray. Indigenous peoples were being exploited for labor, population was gradually suffering from illnesses, and the under rewarded Spanish conquistadors were taking over lands and the local food supply from the villagers. In light of these issues, the Dominican bishop of Tlaxcala, Fray Julian Garcés, formed the idea to bring a solution to the social problem of Tlaxcala: build an experimental colony to endow conquistadors encomienda over land and supervision of the Amerindians cultivating it and protect the Amerindians from Spanish exploitation. Garcés’ main desired outcome of establishing Puebla was to raise the status of Spanish vagabonds who were waiting for their reward by settling them in farms and segregate them from the Amerindians in Tlaxcala. According to this theory, the Spanish would then lose desire to return to Spain and become models for ideal colonization and assimilation between the indigenous community.  

The beginnings of Puebla’s establishment proved to be worthwhile at first; its rich fertile lands were ideal for agriculture and it provided an alternative travel point to Tlaxcala between Veracruz and Mexico City. This would also in turn help resettle the indigenous community in Veracruz and relieve them of Spanish exploitation. Critics to Garcés’ proposal claim other reasons for establishing Puebla. Some claimed that this new, agriculturally based form of encomienda would try to replace more urban, economy-based forms. Others claim it was simply a way to protect the Mexico-Veracruz road from Amerindian threat. These contradictory goals almost severed Garcés’ support for Puebla but in the end, Puebla would take its own course that proved to create a firm foundation for the new city (including a flood that nearly destroyed the city’s first settlers). Spain’s ideal views about creating a new colony would not take form in Puebla.

Nevertheless, Puebla’s founders and later historians would agree that the experiment to create a new colony consisting of a peaceful assimilation between the Spanish and indigenous culture was a success. It was in fact the success of encomienda that provided a reason for the conquistadors to remain in Puebla even after numerous natural disasters and New Spain’s insistence on increasing the benefits to both conquistador and Amerindian. Silver mining and Puebla’s quick change to city status after the floods were other factors that contributed to the increase in population and settlements. Fray Garcés would take part in bringing Spanish architects to build the city in a Spanish colonial style that is preserved to the present day and still function as government buildings, restaurants, hotels and museums.

Post-Colonialism/Race and Puebla’s Identity

Talavera pottery presents itself as a stronger element of Poblano culture because it has become an element of the city that one can take with you. While it is uncertain how Talavera functioned as a souvenir in the 16th through 18th centuries, Talavera pottery today is as kitsch as a keychain with an image of an Aztec god. Due to the nature of Talavera pottery and its use for monasteries and gifts to the Spanish kings, it is most likely that its purpose was both practical and material. What sets Talavera apart from most souvenirs is that they are hand-made according to a blend of ancient pottery making traditions and European visual styles. Robert Young suggests when an original culture is superimposed by a colonial or dominating culture, it transcends itself into a condition of ambiguity, uncertainty, creating an otherness within. Since Puebla was not established within an existing indigenous community, why then do Poblanos today consider their city as part indigenous by using ancient pottery techniques

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5 Ibid. pp 3.

with European decorative styles? A hybridized, split existence is created through Talavera pottery throughout Puebla as it establishes itself as two different cultures living at once. Objects, in this case, are able to create ideas about identity to the modern viewer that supplement the social and political history of Puebla.

What this research intends to provide for the reader are the possibilities that Poblano architecture and Talavera pottery reflect this ambivalence and uncertainty of the condition of their identity. The provided images will convey the message that a sense of otherness dwells within Puebla. Images throughout this research will concentrate on the architecture of Puebla's cathedrals to further exemplify the indigenous and Baroque influences. Talavera images will also be discussed below to establish a larger scheme of Puebla's identity as a hybridized, split existence of two cultures living at the same time: indigenous and European of the 16th - 18th centuries.

In Figure 2, the image is of Nuestra Senora de los Remedios Church in Cholula, Puebla. It was built on top of the Great Pyramid of Cholula in the late 16th century by the Spanish. Demonstrating the influence and domination of Christianity over indigenous beliefs, it reflects a great history of power. It would mean something different if the church was built beside the pyramid, as a way of accepting old beliefs and placing the church in a location as another option. What the Spanish demonstrate is that Christianity dominates and controls the area by building the church on top of the pyramid, seemingly as a victory over the indigenous. Despite the intentions of converting all residents to Christianity, the Spanish actually created a sense of a double-identity existence. By building the church on top of the pyramid, they did not rid the local indigenous people of their ancient beliefs, but rather exuded a sense of keeping their ancestral past, only masking it with an imposed European culture. The result is that Puebla has both indigenous and European roots that identify as Orient and Occident. By changing one's sense of place in an environment, the West transforms the indigenous culture into a new, hybrid culture of indigenous and European religious beliefs.7

Architecture

Cathedrals in Puebla carry the height of Spanish Baroque architecture. In them, a style of vastly ornate altars and ceilings cover most cathedrals across the city. Few major works were actually developed in Spain in the 16th century, suggesting that Spanish Baroque architecture flourished in the cities of Mexico where a promising nation was developing.8 It was the style of Spanish architecture from the past that influenced many of Puebla's cathedrals. Other than richly carved fronts, Spanish architecture gave less emphasis to the outside facades to concentrate on its interior architecture. Cathedrals such as the Puebla cathedral and Santo Domingo give insight into how Spanish architects approached cathedral architecture to give the structure its Baroque identity while including images of the ancient Mesoamerican past such as the sun and the moon; images that allude to the gods the Aztecs worshipped prior to colonization. It is uncertain to reveal the exact intentions behind using these images. Perhaps since these images are widely known to Biblical references to the Christians may be one possibility. Another is to pose the idea that since the Spanish came to Mexico not to simply conquer but to assimilate, providing the indigenous people with subtle references to their ancient religion would have been seen as less threatening to a people whose lives had been dramatically changed.

The idea of Spanish Baroque architecture gaining its own national style during the 16th century is one of complex layers. The Moors conquered the Spanish during the 8th through 11th centuries, which had undoubtedly left behind a profound influence of cultural assimilation and artistic movements in the southern regions of Spain. During the 16th through 17th centuries, what is considered to be the national style of Spain was in fact a fusion of outside influences blended together. Emphasis on area of the cathedral, which many in Puebla reflect, is one influence the Moors left on the Spanish. Other influences include a central lantern placed above or in front of the high altar, little to no stained-glass windows, facades face in various directions as opposed to many cathedrals in Europe that tend to face similar directions (typically the East), and the notion to build upon old temples in order to preserve a continuity of religious experience among the people.9 The latter influence is an important instrument in understanding the complexity of the continuity of ancient religious practice among the indigenous people because Puebla was not built upon any existing civilization. It therefore becomes evident that in order to preserve any type of past, images of the sun and moon were used in its place to allude to ancient religious practices that once dominated Mesoamerica. Puebla's ambiguous identity within their architectural past is another example of how the society believed itself to be both indigenous and Spanish and not exclusively one or the other.

9 Ibid. 33
Figure 3 is the Puebla Cathedral that resides in the city's zocalo (the very center of a city's downtown area in which all streets radiate from). A Spanish-born architect who constructed the cathedral in a late Renaissance style built it in the late 16th century. The outside is built mostly by a dark, reddish stone featuring several sculptures of saints prominent to New Spain such as Santo Domingo and San Francisco. Two large bell towers frame the façade that are topped with Talavera tiled domes. The images on the domes are of the sun and moon. See Figure 4 for an example of these images on the outside of a dome. Aside from the main façade and west façade, the remainder of the cathedral is built with cement, painted in a pale orange and pink color. To the far right of Figure 3, an image of the sun is sculpted into the dark stone. This is an original characteristic of the cathedral since it is sculpted directly from the stone, dating the sun image to also have been constructed in the 16th-17th century. I believe it is the intention of the architect to include these images of the sun and moon throughout the interior and exterior of the cathedral because of the significance of its symbolic reference. As discussed above, the sun and moon provided a great sense of insight into both the Aztec and Christian religions. Both shared a similar symbolism in which the sun conveyed a powerful being, a life-giving entity central to their core cultural values. The inclusion of its imagery is not as prominent in most cathedrals of Western Europe because the imagery emphasized was that of Christ, his disciples and the Virgin Mary. Although the Virgin Mary is the most commonly seen figure in Mexican religious art, images of the sun and moon as seen here at Puebla Cathedral present a powerful fusion of the intermixing of ideas and religious symbols of ancient Mesoamerica and Spain.

Only a few blocks east of Puebla Cathedral is another cathedral on a smaller scale; Santo Domingo. Figure 5 shows the inside of a dome located on the west wing of the cathedral. Santo Domingo had three of these chandeliers in the Baroque style with curvature that resembled intertwining vines. The main altar of Santo Domingo holds a ceiling-high altar of gilded wood with niches about three feet wide running along every inch of the altar. Each niche carries a sculpture of a patron saint significant to Mexico's founding. The middle niche holds the Virgin Mary and Christ as the center of all saints. The frame of Figure 5 is only a fraction of what can be seen when standing in the aisle of the chapel. The entire hall is decorated in very ornate gilded wood that literally covers every inch of ceiling and wall space. The only area not covered is the floor in which the benches and aisle are. The windows in the dome are the only natural light that enters this area so one can only imagine the chapel's full potential when all its candles were lit in the evening. The primary style in this chapel is Baroque and almost Rococo. Rococo was a brief period towards the end of the Baroque era that often describes a style almost too ornate. It was mainly a style that French royalty adopted around the time of Louis IV in the mid to late 17th century. This suggests that this wing of the cathedral was built much later than the main structure, which was built earlier in the late 16th century. This would also explain why this chapel looks different from the main aisles that are more of the late Renaissance style. Figure 5 is of the center of the dome that has an image of the sun surrounding the oculus. Unlike the oculus in the Pantheon in Rome, the center does not let in light, only the windows directly below. It is implied instead that the symbolism of the sun gives the church its light. The importance of the sun in this image is much like that of the sun images at Puebla Cathedral. The sun represents a fusion of religious ideas between the Aztecs and Christian Spanish colonies. Since most indigenous people were forced (or persuaded as many Spaniards may argue) to convert to Christianity among the colonies, this became a symbol to convey a message of brotherhood among them. The Spanish in Puebla did not overturn an indigenous civilization because there was not an existing settlement in the area. Bringing in various groups of people to live in Puebla including Spanish officers, vagabonds and indigenous people meant that it was more important to find a way to coexist peacefully rather than destroying a culture and building a new one on top of it. Images of the sun and moon were a subtle way to imply a peaceful marriage between the various cultures living in Puebla.

Talavera Pottery

A brief history of Talavera pottery

Author Jenaro Blacio claims Talavera is a less precise term to describe the pottery since its production technique is indigenous. Mayolica describes the pottery in the more general sense as a folk art of the people with metallic enamel. The term is derived from Spain which describes a type of glazed earthenware and implies its type as distinctively Spanish. The term Mayolica is used both in Spain and Mexico and is also known as loza or talavera. One interesting note to the reader is that the author uses talavera in only a few places in his book, as if Talavera implied the Spanish domination in Mexico. The term mayolica is implied to be more indigenous to the author to suggest that the indigenous technique has been superimposed by the European technique and therefore the author uses this term prominently throughout the text.

The first father to head the church in Spain was San Francisco de Asis under Pope Adriano VI (1522-1523). He brought with him head friar, Martin de Valencia and 12 other companions to commemorate the 12 apostles of
Procedures for Talavera pottery

Local dirt from Puebla is treated in a bath and filtered for usable clay in structures all made from wood, ceramics, or other natural materials. Metallic utensils are not used at any point during the process. A filter bag filled with a form of powder or talc is used to line the boxes where the dirt is bathed. A soft, almost liquid form of clay is then bathed and filtered again with smooth river rock to form the more commonly seen clay that is nearly solid yet soft enough to form.

At chest-high level, the turntable is built into a wider table. A rod that is attached to another turntable near the floor is used to spin the clay with the master's bare feet; no electrical devices are used during any part of the pottery-making process. After the clay is spun into moldings of either plates or saucers (cups, vases, and jars are created in certain cansons but are slightly individualized since they do not have molds), They are dried for a period 3 days and after wards dipped into a solution that will turn the pottery an off-white color, which is the base color for all genuine Talavera pottery.

The dried, white pottery is then taken to a large oven where temperatures reach around 300 degrees Celsius (almost 600 degrees Fahrenheit). They are fired for several hours and then cooled for 48 hours. The pottery is now ready for the artisans to create original artistic representations onto each piece. No two pieces are exactly the same because they are all hand-painted. The pottery is then glazed with faience or plomo, which is a lead-based metal. Plomo gave the pottery a much more brilliant look but when used for cooking and eating, slowly gave people lead poisoning. Today, very few trivial amounts of plomo can be found in authentic Talavera that is not harmful. Imitation Talavera pottery does not contain this ingredient and therefore would not earn the official stamp, DO4, which recognizes Talavera pottery as official and authentic.

Figure 7 is of a large Talavera jug from the collection of Jose Luis Bello in the Bello Museum in Puebla, Puebla. It stands about three and a half feet tall and about two feet at its widest section. The mouth of the jug is smaller, most likely used to hold water rather than for a flowerpot. Although it is currently displayed among other flowerpots, other jugs of the same size are placed inside the museum either near water sources or as decorative elements in a room. Its beige background color confirms its authenticity as true Talavera and small chips reveal the native clay used to create the piece. The royal blue color is used as part of the official canon of Talavera and is thickly painted onto the jug. This style of using only the blue colors resembles more commonly known ceramics from Holland and China. If one asks a local, they will tell you that Puebla created the all blue style first and Europe came after. It is uncertain where the style derived exactly, however it can be assumed that the technique is European. The images reveal several depictions of a bird, possibly a swan, intertwined with floral and small vine leaves that nearly cover the entire negative space. Around the mouth of the vessel is a geometric square pattern as those seen in Greek pottery of the Geometric Period. Ancient Mesoamerican pottery also reflects geometric patterns such as in Figure 8, seen around the edge of the plate. The square pattern resembles that of the Talavera jug, implementing ancient patterns into a more decorative, European style. Similar geometric lines are seen at the bottom rim of the jug with less emphasis on ancient patterns.


11 The workshops are often also galleries that display the Talavera pottery and can sell for as little as $10 USD for very small pieces to as much as $400 USD for a large flower pot. Authentic Talavera pottery is much more expensive than imitation because of the lengthy and handmade process. There are two elements that the observer can use to determine if the piece is authentic: The DO4 stamp is found on the bottom that may or may not be accompanied by the official sticker of the government and the base color is off-white, almost beige as oppose to pure white.

12 Indigenous patterns include several gods and geometric patterns; the more ornate meant that it was made for the wealthy, Simple patterns were used for the poor of the pueblo. Cholula has examples of many of these as they are the closest indigenous village to Puebla. A mural in the Museo Amparo depicts this change in artist renderings from right to left of the canvas.
Figure 7 shows a set of decorative plates from the collection of the Museum Gonzalez. An officer in Puebla, Jose Luis Gonzalez, collected these plates and other Talavera pottery items. The most visually striking piece in the set is the oval plate in the center row depicting a woman in a colonial dress set on a yellow background. She carries a purse and wears a shawl around her shoulders. The purse may indicate that she is of a middle ranking class to imply that she has items of value in the purse. She is not wearing a bodice, which usually implies that she cannot afford one as a high-class ranking woman can. In comparison to many casta paintings, the woman in the plate may be an indigenous woman who is married to a middle class man. As in seen in Figure 9, she resembles the woman, known as the China Poblana in this scene. The China Poblana is a local story of a young woman in early colonial Puebla who came as a servant, later marrying a wealthy man of Puebla. The legend says that she created the style of dress as seen in her portraits, drawings, and in the oval Talavera plate from the style of dress of her native home, India.13 The woman in the plate stands in a full portrait with her head turned at one quarter angle with a modest and calm demeanor.

In Figure 10, a piece of small tile from the Museo Bello depicts a woman playing a guitar in similar colonial fashion to that of the China Poblana. Due to these similarities, it is to my understanding that the figure in the tile is the China Poblana. As seen in both Figures 8 and 9, the hair is pulled back similar fashion and the dress seems to be of a middle class status. Women were typically not depicted in this type of art form unless it was either the Virgin Mary or the China Poblana. Resources are unable to confirm the woman in the Talavera tile but we can see through her dress and similar hairstyle, it may well possibly be of the China Poblana. Images of the China Poblana playing the guitar have not come across my research which may suggest this may be the only image of the China Poblana in this style.

Conclusion

I have come to understand a great deal about the history of multicultural Mexico throughout my research. Colonization left an incredible complex history throughout the nation and in Puebla it represents something different than what it left in Mexico City. Mexico City’s metropolitan cathedral in its zocalo is the largest cathedral in Mexico. What many would almost overlook if you were not from the area are the ruins of a great temple of ancient Mesoamerica it sits upon in ancient Tenochtitlan. Mexico City once was a land of various temples and plazas that covered the area with one of the greatest civilizations that ran the city. The Spanish then came in the 16th century and destroyed almost every inch of ancient history it carried. The land was nearly transformed into an area unrecognizable to its ancient inhabitants. I believe a stronger sense of ambivalence existed here where indigenous people carried a love-hate relationship with the Spanish and greatly resisted the change. In Puebla, a more peaceful approach to assimilation developed here. When the idea to build a new colony near Tlaxcala emerged by friar Julian Garcés, the Spanish under Cortes’ guidance decided peacefully reorganize the settlement to Puebla, a colony built from the ground up.

Although the way in which Mexico City and Puebla were established differ in resettling the indigenous peoples, both share a common goal in conveying a sense of religious continuity. Many of Mexico City’s temples lay just under the modern city’s grounds that convey this continuity, which recent archaeological digs have been able to reveal. It also displays the message of the Spanish visually and militarily conquering the Aztec empire. In a slightly different view, Puebla incorporates images and ideas from Aztec religious beliefs and practices in their cathedral architecture and Talavera pottery. Religious continuity is shown in a rather subtle way because there was no ancient civilization to build upon. Since Poblanos of the 16th through 18th centuries were continuously resettled and grouped to live in Puebla, the art reflects a sense of assimilation rather than military conquest. A fusion of these cultures is seen in cathedrals, mainly through the use of sun and moon images, which help the indigenous people and Spanish encomenderos coexist and gradually assimilate in a Christian society.

Through Talavera pottery, it is noticeable in the technique behind its production than it is seen visually. Talavera techniques developed in the Spanish colonial period but the production of fine pottery was established among the indigenous people in the surrounding Puebla areas such as Cholula. The example of Talavera pottery production in Puebla further establishes the idea of Poblano identity being both Orient and Occident, a fusion of an indigenous culture assimilated with the Spanish Crown of the 16th through 18th centuries. The notion that the Spanish blended these cultures rather than deplete their existence (as what was happening in North America) speaks volumes of the differing ideas of colonization between the Spanish and other European countries such as England. Existing anti-Spanish sentiment throughout Europe generally consisted of the idea that the Spanish were lazy and

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13 Francisco de la Maza, Catarina De San Juan: Princesa De La India Y Visionaria De Puebla (Mexico City: Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, 1990).

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cruel to the indigenous inhabitants. I find irony in some of these ideas as the same colonial period in North America reflected that of military conquest and non-cultural assimilation to the Native Americans in that area.

Ambiguous identity throughout Puebla’s history is spoken within these visual entities of cathedral architecture and Talavera pottery because of the confusion of what is exclusively Orient and Occident. Puebla inherits both of these qualities and therefore creates an ambiguous identity of a complex nature. As Puebla is both an indigenous and Spanish-rooted culture, its identity consists of complex layers that are better understood through observation of its architecture and Talavera pottery. A thorough understanding of these art forms will reveal a more peaceful approach to how the Spanish conquest affected the area of Puebla as opposed to that of Mexico City, for example. Puebla’s importance in Mexico’s history is further increased by the fact that the city acts as a stopping point between Veracruz (the main shipping port) and Mexico City. It serves as a cultural window and imperial communication bridge between two of Mexico’s most important cities which become part of its complex identity.

References


Images

Figure 1. Casta painting, unknown artist, 18th century. “6. De Español y Negra, Mulato” translates to “Of Spanish and Black, Mulato.”

Figure 2. Nuestra Señora de los Remedios church on top of the Great Pyramid of Cholula.

Figure 3. Puebla Cathedral, Puebla, Mexico. 16th-18th centuries.
Figure 4. Puebla Cathedral, side view with central dome.

Figure 5. Santo Domingo Cathedral, west chapel, 17th-18th century.
Figure 6. Large Talavera jug from Museo Bello.

Figure 7. Set of Talavera Plates from Museo Gonzalez.

Figure 8. Ancient Mesoamerican ceramic plate. Aztec Culture.
Figure 9. Nineteenth century drawing of the China Poblana.

Figure 10. Talavera tile of woman and guitar from the collection of Jose Bello, 18-19th century.