

“MESTIZAJE” AND THE “ANDEAN BAROQUE” IN ARCHITECTURE: SAN LORENZO DE CARANGAS

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1

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*and on the upper surface of each circle is a siren, who
goes round with them, hymning a single tone or note;
the eight together form one harmony. (Plato, The
Republic, Book X)*

1. Introduction

In the town of Potosí, on the outskirts of the central region, lies the church of San Lorenzo de Potosí (or San Lorenzo de Carangas), a building regarded as one of the biggest landmarks of the so-called *mestizo* current of Andean Baroque in Bolivia (and perhaps all of South America). The main reason for the status is the façade, whose portico, replete with stone-carved mythological figures and native species, was built by Mestizo, Creole, and Spanish artisans between 1728 and 1744, in an elaborate composition reminiscent of a wooden reredos. That being said, it is interesting to note here how the combination of elements from multiple cultures (American and European) at that place and point in time evince not only what is regarded as the notion of *mestizaje* in art (painting or architecture), but also some degree local cultural resistance in the face of European rule.

San Lorenzo de Potosí is one of several parishes that were established in the city as soon as the Spaniards began exploring the Cerro Rico, in 1545; most such places were meant for the mining population. It started being built in 1548 as a parish dedicated to La Anunciación and intended for the Spanish, and by the mid-18th century it had undergone several changes. During the 16th century, the original building was damaged in a blizzard and had to be rebuilt. Following orders given by Viceroy Francisco de Toledo during a visit to the city in 1542, what was then the Church of La Anunciación was converted into the parish of San Lorenzo de Carangas, intended for members of the ethnic group from the Oruro area who were heading for Potosí as *mitayos* at that point.

2

The church's final remodeling took place in the 18th century and took 16 years to complete, culminating in the full-fledged façade with the portico, the towers and the central dome. History has it that the architecture was designed by Spain's Bernardo de Rojas, whereas the portico is credited to the native artist Luis Niño, a painter, sculptor, and carver from the School of Potosí and a contemporary of the painter Gaspar Melchor de Berrío. Niño is believed to have researched the elements that adorn the portico along with an apprentice named Jahuirra, who was also a native.

As a general description, the Church of San Lorenzo is composed of one single nave, with the dome above the crossing. The portico is bisected and both its sections are decorated with repeating floral motifs that run along the entire structure. At the bottom portion, the highlight is the Solomonic columns that hold the upper portion in place. Decorated with grape bunches, the columns are anthropomorphic-looking, and each ends on a sort of caryatid decorated with the figure of a two-headed eagle. On the inside, surrounding the door and underpinning its arch, two other female, *Hermés*-like figures stand out, adorned with floral motifs. At the top portion, the figure of Saint

Michael Archangel, clad as a warrior, and above him the near-imperceptible images of Saint Lawrence and Saint Vincent. But maybe the element that stands out the most here is the two sirens that surround Michael Archangel. Carrying a typical guitar from Andean mestizo culture, the *charango*, escorted by the Sun (one of them) and the Moon (the other one), as well as by stars, these sirens characterize this upper set as a representation of Heaven.

2. On the notion of *mestizaje* and its presence in Andean Baroque

Before commenting more pointedly on the elements that stand out in the San Lorenzo de Carangas façade, we must quickly consider a few aspects of the notion of *mestizaje* and its connection with Andean Baroque in architecture.

As we know, the term “mestizo” was originally meant to designate people of mixed native and European origin. Culturally speaking, the notion was analogously established to designate productions and artworks that contain elements from both those cultures. DaCosta Kaufmann mentions that Angel Guido was among the first to use that expression, in the mid-1930s, in discussing architecture in Bolivia. Notwithstanding the problems that notion entails, our concern here is with perceiving the elements that constitute the native and European cultures that have informed the *mestizo* style.

Carlos D. Mesa Gisbert, for instance, stresses that what is regarded as the “pre-Hispanic Andean culture” was itself the result of a slew of religious contacts and social and cultural exchanges between different peoples that evolved around Lake Titicaca. Those exchanges were intense, including between populations from the high plains and lowlands, which explains the presence of elements from the typically tropical flora and

fauna in the ornamentation of several Andean artefacts and artworks. It is, therefore, a context of cultural diversity which, as Tereza Gisbert and Carlos Mesa Gisbert have shown, was once the object of admiration by Europeans – men who were fresh out of Renaissance – for its similarity with the plural reality of Ancient Greece and Rome.

This aspect is of the utmost importance in analyzing a piece of architecture such as San Lorenzo de Carangas, whose façade features ornaments that reflect both the diversity of elements and the process of identification between the Andean and Ancient Greek-Roman cultures.

4

3. Sirens and *charangos*

The case of the Church of San Lorenzo de Carangas seems to show that the essence of what is considered the notion of *mestizaje*, more than relating to the combination of elements from different cultures, is also about the identification between similar elements from different cultures. The key example of that is the figure of the sirens, a widespread decorative element in Andean culture throughout the 18th century.

According to Tereza and Carlos Gisbert, sirens were taken from classical Renaissance stories, and their presence in paintings and reliefs at several points around Lake Titicaca is associated not only with the traditional mythological figure present in the Mediterranean, but also with the figure of fish-women present in pre-Columbian Andean mythology. Andean legend has it that two sirens dwelled in Lake Titicaca, Quesintuu and Umantuu, who attempted to seduce Tunupa, the main god in pre-Incan cosmology, identified as Saint Bartholomew in the context of Christianity. Therefore,

one can see that the Western European siren and the Andean fish-women have a shared aspect: both symbolize beauty, as well as seduction and sin.

In San Lorenzo de Carangas, Quesintuu and Umantuu appear amid the Sun, the Moon and the stars wielding their habitual instrument, the *charango*. That composition matches Plato's theory of the Universe, according to which eight sirens move the celestial orbit with their music. Not by chance, the composition evokes an aspect of musical harmony. The fact that Quesintuu and Umantuu are pictured in Heaven here, even though they are also representative of sin, is again an aspect of Andean culture, which promotes the conflation of opposite aspects.

5

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