

An abstract painting featuring vibrant colors like blue, yellow, red, and white, layered and textured. The colors are applied in broad, expressive strokes, creating a sense of movement and depth. The background is a mix of these colors, with some areas appearing more saturated than others.

# Contemporary Discussions In Art History

Sociohistorical  
And  
Psychological  
Observations

Bruna Bejarano

 EDITORA  
ARTEMIS  
2020



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## PRESENTATION

Art History is a vast field of study which, loosely explained, deals with the effort to understand how, historically, different groups and people represented their artistic talents. Philosophical and religious beliefs, economic conditions, psychological constructions — all the elements that play a role in the development of human beings — influence stylistic choices of artists, whether they are manifested in painting, sculpture, ceramics, architecture, or any other form of artistic efforts. An interdisciplinary field *par excellence*, Art History looks at art from a holistic perspective, trying to understand artistic manifestations in their relation to the time periods and social context in which they are produced. Cultural influences — such as religion, social arrangements, institutions and gender constructions — all have a direct impact on every human intellectual manifestation, including the arts.

This book, entitled “**Contemporary discussions in Art History: sociohistorical and psychological observations**” is a collection of six articles that point to some ways in which specific art works are either (or both) a revelation of a sociohistorical moment or a subversive attempt to transform their context by denouncing operating power structures. In one way or another, all artists studied in this book used their craft to affirm what they perceive as an agenda worth advancing.

I hope you enjoy reading it!

Bruna Bejarano

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>CHAPTER 1</b> .....	<b>1</b>
THE ART OF RESISTANCE IN THE WORKS OF GUSTAVE COURBET, JACOB LAWRENCE, PABLO PICASSO AND BARBARA KRUGER	
DOI 10.37572/EdArt_0310406201	
<b>CHAPTER 2</b> .....	<b>18</b>
RENE MAGRITTE: A TENTATIVE PSYCHOANALYSIS	
DOI 10.37572/EdArt_0310406202	
<b>CHAPTER 3</b> .....	<b>28</b>
DECORUM IN RELIGIOUS PAINTINGS	
DOI 10.37572/EdArt_0310406203	
<b>CHAPTER 4</b> .....	<b>39</b>
DISEGNO VERSUS COLORE	
DOI 10.37572/EdArt_0310406204	
<b>CHAPTER 5</b> .....	<b>49</b>
THE RENDERING OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION AT THE CHAPEL OF LA MERCED	
DOI 10.37572/EdArt_0310406205	
<b>CHAPTER 6</b> .....	<b>62</b>
LAS MENINAS	
DOI 10.37572/EdArt_0310406206	
<b>ABOUT THE AUTHOR</b> .....	<b>73</b>
<b>INDEX</b> .....	<b>74</b>

## THE RENDERING OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION AT THE CHAPEL OF LA MERCED

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**ABSTRACT:** Among the dozens of artworks depicting Catholic subject matter, a rendering of the *Immaculate Conception* stands out on the wall on the far left of the main entrance of the *Iglesia-Museo Perú de Nuestra Señora de la Merced* (Our Lady of Mercy of Peru Church-Museum), in the Miami-Dade neighborhood of Allapattah (or *Little Santo Domingo*). This article undertakes an analysis of that specific artwork, painted by an anonymous artist at an undetermined time, but showing distinctive marks which connect it to the original and unique style of the School of Cuzco. In conclusion, the piece embodies the popular Catholic imagery of the religious Spaniards, who wished to consolidate their power in the region by disseminating their ideals and religious beliefs, while portraying also the originality of the conquered natives, evident in the style and decorative techniques of the artists of Cuzco.

**KEYWORDS:** Immaculate Conception at the Chapel of La Merced; School of Cuzco; Spanish Baroque.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In the Miami-Dade neighborhood of

Allapattah – also known as *Little Santo Domingo* in honor of its large Dominican community – a Peruvian inspired chapel stands as a bridge to Latin America’s colonial past and cultural roots.

Home to one of the largest and most impressive collections of 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century sculptures and paintings, the *Iglesia-Museo Perú de Nuestra Señora de la Merced* (Our Lady of Mercy of Peru Church-Museum), or simply the Chapel of La Merced, holds more than 150 works of art from several Latin American countries. Most of the art collection was gathered by Father José Luis Menendez over the past several years and has been studied and catalogued by Carol Damian, a former Chief Curator for the Frost Art Museum and professor from the Department of Art and Art History at Florida International University.

The purpose of this article is to analyze this specific artwork, which has no known artist or date of completion and was probably painted – as most pieces in the collection were – by a colonized Indigenous artist using tools and techniques learned from Spanish colonizers.

To fulfill this purpose, it is necessary to engage in a brief recollection of historical context, as well as to describe the insurgence

of Spanish Baroque and the School of Cuzco – whose characteristics I will try to demonstrate as present in certain visual cues that attest to the suggestion of their influence and can, perhaps, give us a hope to roughly estimate the piece’s time and place.

## 2. HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In 1492, while in search of a sea route to Asia, explorer Christopher Columbus encountered the Americas instead. Believing the land to be a part of the Orient, Columbus went to his deathbed never fully realizing the extent of his “discovery.” Pregnant with riches, the Americas (specifically Central and South America) were of great interest to the Spaniards, who along with other European countries sought to gain control of the newfound territory.

Throughout the next centuries, Columbus’ voyage across the Atlantic and onto the New World marked what would be the beginning of the colonization of its people. As part of a plan to evangelize the natives, the explorers brought with them missionaries, who would spread the word of God in an attempt to convert the indigenous to Christianity.

As an early form of propaganda, art was a great vehicle and didactic tool for the dissemination of the Catholic religion and its beliefs:

The importation of religious texts illustrated with scenes of Christian doctrine was a common practice first established during the reign of the Spanish King Phillip II (r.1556-1598). Literally, thousands of illustrated religious books were generated by the printing houses of Antwerp (then under Spanish rule) and Northern Europe and exported to the Catholic missionaries in the colonies. This apparently effective and prolific use of engraved images served to keep Spanish colonial artists abreast of the European styles and movements. Many aspects and artists of the European Baroque were introduced to the colonies by way of the printed page. (MO, 1992, p. 34)

As Spain took over Andean land, the Spanish art and artists came along too, infiltrating their culture while influencing the natives, who were starting to paint religious themes themselves:

Imported prints were sometimes literally copied; sometimes their images were only partially used or reinterpreted by colonial artist. Among the native artists credited with being strongly influenced by the influx of printed works was Diego Quispe Tito (1611-1681), who oftentimes referred to himself as “the Inca.” (MO, 1992, p.34)

Diego Quispe Tito was a Quechuan<sup>1</sup> painter that is credited with defining the characteristics of what would be the Cuzco School of painting. Since the subject matter was new to the natives, and possibly because they wished to preserve

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1. Quechua people originated among the indigenous people of Peru, and today the term encompasses all indigenous people of South America who speak the Quechuan languages.

their own set of beliefs, a lot of paintings produced by Andean artists – as those of Tito – display a combination of Catholic images and influence with indigenous interpretations and renditions. In other words, the natives imprinted their style to the style of the Spanish colonizers they were imitating.

### 3. SPANISH BAROQUE AND THE CUZCO SCHOOL

With the rise of the Protestant Reformation<sup>2</sup> in the 1500s, a Counter-Reformation<sup>3</sup> by the Catholics ensued in retaliation.

Intrinsically connected to religion, Baroque Art originated in Italy precisely in the context of the Catholic Counter-Reformation and:

(...) suggests religious devotion radically separated from the workaday world, engaged less with the intellect than direct, emotional experience of the heavenly realm through dazzling displays of holy objects and the fine arts. (MILLS & TAYLOR, 1998, p. 347).

Baroque Art dominated the artistic style in Europe from about 1600 to 1750 and quickly spread throughout other countries, notably Spain. The painting *Martyrdom of Saint Philip*, considered the most expressive work by Spanish painter Josep de Ribera (1591-1652), displays some typical Baroque characteristics in that it uses contrast of dark and light, deep color and broad diagonals to help illustrate a dramatic and emotionally charged religious message:

---

2. The Protestant Reformation (ca. 1517-1555) was an initially religious reform set forth by Martin Luther's "95 theses" (embraced by many other reformers, such as John Calvin, Henry VIII) which challenged the Catholic Church's power and authority to define Christianity. It triggered wars and had vast political, cultural and intellectual implications that changed the entire European Continent and the world.

3. The Counter-Reformation was the Catholic Church's response to the Protestant Reformation. The Catholic Church was slow to systematically address the Reform, and only articulated their arguments in the Council of Trent (1545-1563), which produced forceful answers combining a renewed spirituality and the reorganization of Inquisitions to fight the heresy of Protestants.





Figure 1. *Martyrdom of Saint Philip*, 1639.

The influence of Catholic religion is evident: the canonization and veneration of saints was condemned by Protestantism as heresy of apotheosis or idolatry, and Ribera's painting represents the preparation for the crucifixion of Philip the Apostle I (*Saint Phillip*). The theme of martyrdom of saints was, thereafter, very dear to the Catholics and the Counter-Reformation<sup>4</sup>.

From Spain, Baroque Art spread to Latin America by missionaries, especially the Jesuits, who used the visual arts to overcome the language barrier in the conversion of indigenous people:

Since the language barrier that separated the Europeans from the Native Americans could not be overcome in a short period, at least at an early stage of contact, the missionaries often relied on what they called 'materialities', 1) namely, the visual arts, architecture, music, theatrical performances, etc. Convinced that they could touch the heart through the eye as effectively as the ear, they built splendid churches, decorated them sumptuously with paintings and sculptures, and staged spectacular ceremonies with music and dancing (SAITO, 2006, p. 2).

During colonial times, several cities in Latin America flourished as artistic centers. Cuzco, a city that had also been the core of the Inca Empire, came to occupy an important role in the Andean region:

---

4. Note: see Chapter 3 of this book for an analysis of the development of propaganda in the Catholic Church.

The city of Cuzco (...) was considered the most productive artistic center in South America. It was in this city that an enormous number of painters' workshops developed and produced what is now known as the Cuzco style of painting. In its heyday, thousands of paintings and artworks were created and exported to areas throughout the Spanish colonies. The Cuzco style clearly came to reflect an art that is characteristic of the city's mestizo spirit and culture. (MO, 1992, p. 29)

As it is clear from the text above, the artists who worked there didn't simply reproduce the Baroque style as it was developed in Spain, but were also influenced by local traditions, giving way to an original art that established analogies with their native religious beliefs.

It is noteworthy that the Catholic Church had a very important role in the developing of these cultural centers in general, and of Cuzco in specific:

The Church's role in the development of the art of Cuzco Circle would be paramount (...) Its use of artists, at first imported and in time, native-born, was to advance Christianity. Art became the visual language and tool which aided in the Christian conversions of the native populations. The Church's use of various art media helped translate Christian iconography for the aboriginal people and helped convey an understanding of the symbolism associated with Church doctrines. Jesuit missionaries in the early sixteenth century found art to be so effective in their conversion of the Indians that they frequently requested Rome to send more artists to aid their religious mission. (MO, 1992, p. 30)

Over time, the Cuzco style of painting was established, reflecting an originality born out of the mix of the cultural and ideological domination from Spain on one side, and resistance and preservation of local traditions by the indigenous people, on the other side.

The anonymous painting below, "Nuestra Señora de Cocharcas bajo el baldaquín" (*Our Lady of Cocharcas Under the Canopy*), exhibited in the Brooklyn Museum, is an example of the art produced by the School of Cuzco (Peru, 1765), in that it samples the native adaptation to religious themes:



Figure 2. *Nuestra Señora de Cocharcas bajo el baldaguín*, 1765.

In summary, some of the characteristics of the European Baroque brought to the art of the New World were: a heavily religious influence, which originated mostly themes akin to the Catholic church; the related conflict between the heavenly/spiritual versus earthly life; the emotional appeal aimed at conveying the religious messages and the use of dark, shadowy imagery – all of which, to a lesser or greater extent, made their way into the art promoted in Latin America during the colonization period – including the works of arts from the Cuzco school.

#### 4. THE DEPICTION OF THE VIRGIN MARY

During the colonization period, religious imagery was extremely popular in Europe, as the Middle Ages had left behind a strongly faithful and devout Catholic public. Over time, since the Protestants had abolished the cult to the saints and

the veneration of the Virgin Mary, the Catholic Church came to prioritize her representation – thus, paintings depicting the Virgin also became extremely popular in the evangelization of the colonies.

Controversial was the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception – which held that the Virgin Mary was conceived without original sin – an idea that was not accepted by the Church until the mid-1800s. Opponents of the Immaculate Conception believed in the Doctrine of Sanctification, that is, that Mary was conceived in sin and later, while still in her mother's womb, had been purified by God. The subject was of great appeal to the people of Spain during the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries:

(...) monarchs repeatedly petitioned the papacy to rule in favor of the Virgin's Immaculate Conception. Inspired by the fervor of the crown and its theological advisers, the populace of Seville would take to the streets whenever the doctrine was challenged by its critics or exalted by its proponents (...) In these circumstances, it is no surprise that paintings of the Virgin of the Immaculate Conception were always in demand (BATICLE, 1988, p. 33)

Thus, the Virgin became an emblem of protest for believers and notably celebrated in works of art. Religious orders would commission the likes of such artists as Francisco Zurbarán and Bartolomé Murillo – both famous Baroque Spanish painters – to illustrate works with a religious narrative. To achieve a faithful representation, artists relied on John of Patmos's Book of Revelations, where he describes “A woman robed with sun, beneath her feet the moon, and on her head a crown of twelve stars” (DAMIAN, 1995, p. 32).

Francisco Pacheco wrote at length about how to depict the Virgin Mary in his book *Arte de la Pintura* (published in 1649), where he displayed an “almost obsessive concern with orthodoxy” and “decanted his life's study of what would now be called the Counter-Reformation iconography” (BROWN, p. 121).



Figure 3. *The Virgin of the Immaculate Conception with Miguel Cid*, Francisco Pacheco, 1611.

Pacheco also helped establish the “orthodox formulas for the major themes of Catholic art,” advancing an idea that was dear to him and to Catholic painters of his time, which was that the “principle aim of painting, and its principle glory, was to excite the faithful to adore and love God and to cultivate piety.” In recognition for his efforts, he was appointed in 1618 as the “overseer of sacred images by the Seville Inquisition” (BROWN, 1991, p. 121).

It is no wonder that his paintings of the Virgin Mary – including their iconography – seemed to have served as more than an inspiration to painters who followed, including Zurbarán and Murillo. It is also not a coincidence that many of its iconography is present in the *Immaculate Conception* at the Chapel de la Merced.

## 5. THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION AT THE CHAPEL DE LA MERCED

The painting of the *Immaculate Conception* located at the Chapel de la Merced, in Allapattah, Florida, exhibits a number of characteristics of the Spanish Baroque style: from its heavily religious theme – the Immaculate Conception – to the use of Christian symbolism. It is almost certain that the artist(s) who painted the artwork had been exposed to the works of Pacheco, Zurbarán and Murillo or at the very least inspired by works that had emulated those masters.

The artwork, which is about 1.60 x 1.40 meters (63 x 41 inches) is an oil painting with no known artist or date of completion. In it, the Virgin Mary stands atop a moon, covered in a blue cloak, looking downward, hands in prayer. She is surrounded by some of the same symbols described by Pacheco.



Figure 4. The Immaculate Conception at Chapel of La Merced, unknown artist and date.

The influence of Francisco Zurbarán can be visually appreciated in the comparison to some of his Immaculate Conception paintings:

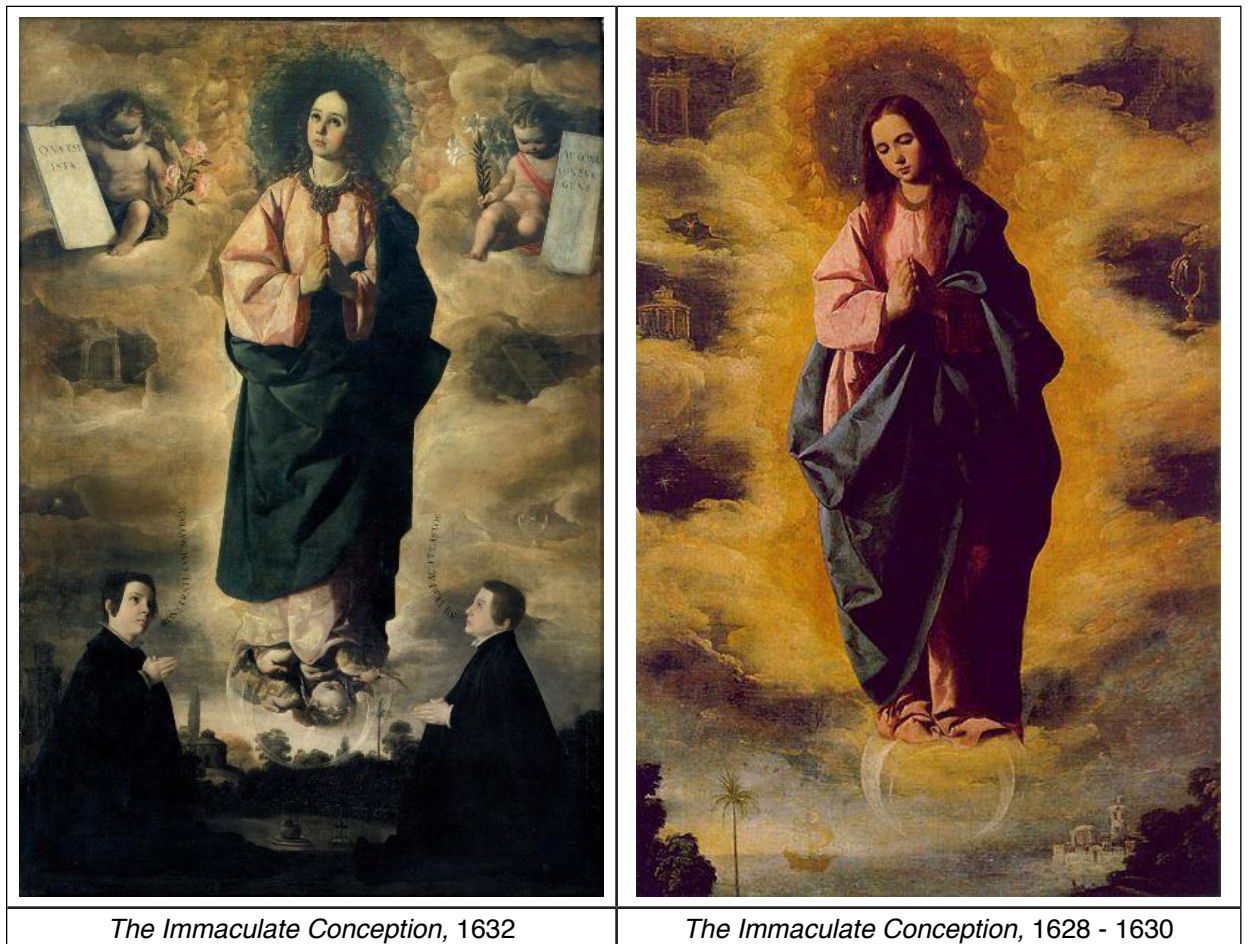


Figure 5. Two different renditions of the Virgin Mary by Francisco Zurbarán.

In Zurbarán's paintings, which are closer to Pacheco's prescriptions than Murillo's, a young Mary appears center frame upon a crescent moon with her hands in prayer.

Alternatively, the work also shows a not surprising resemblance to Bartolomé Murillo's renditions of the Virgin Mary:



Figure 6. Two different renditions of the Virgin Mary by Bartolomé Esteban Murillo.

Both Francisco Zurbarán and Bartolomé Murillo's Immaculate Conceptions painted in the 1630s are more or less reflective of the work by Pacheco – incorporating the same symbols and iconography that their predecessor had laid out for them. More specifically, those paintings show a very young Mary standing on a crescent moon, surrounded by symbols of her purity, her head usually encircled by a ring of twelve stars (as is the case of Zurbarán paintings, and a more faded version of the stars in Murillo's work). Still following Pacheco, in Zurbarán's paintings she stands over a naturalistic landscape that includes additional symbols of purity – the cypress of Zion, the well of living waters, the tower of David, and the enclosed garden, among others.

As we can see in most of the works that probably inspired the art piece being analyzed, Mary is always dressed in a long robe, enveloped by a navy blue coat, standing on a crescent moon – an essential part of Pacheco's prescribed iconography – her hands clasped in front of her chest and her image surrounded by cherubim and by symbols of her purity – white lilies, roses, and the mirror.

In the handbook of Christian Symbolism, color is mentioned as a tool of metaphor in painting. Blue is considered the color of heaven and piety, while white is thought to be the color of purity and – in the case of the Virgin Mary – used to



convey her Assumption<sup>5</sup>.

All of these characteristics can also be appreciated in the painting at La Merced, marking a distinct influence of the Spanish Baroque style of painting. As it would have been natural in the historical context already described, Andean artists also used the Virgin Mary as one of their regular themes.

What distinguishes the *Immaculate Conception* rendition at the Chapel de la Merced from the works of Zurbarán and Murillo are precisely the qualities more specifically associated with the Cuzco style. The painters from the Cuzco school were not satisfied with painting the Virgin Mary with the decorum seen in Zurbarán and Murillo. The addition of some unique native elements suggests that the piece being analyzed is definitely a product of the Cuzco school. The most obvious of these elements is the triangular shape formed by the attire of Mary, a clear approximation to the Virgin of the Andes, as Professor Carol Damian describes:

The one consistent feature that appears as a dominant stylistic and iconographic trait in Cuzco paintings of the Virgin is the triangular shapes of Mary's dress, a reference to the shape of the mountain and, especially, her role as Pachamama, the Earth Mother. Whether the subject relates to her role as protector of the earth, the moon deity, or the royal queen, the Cuzco Virgin is the most frequently dressed in an elaborately decorated dress of triangular form. It appears not only on canvas but on murals and statues as well. (DAMIAN, 1995, p. 50)

That is, the dress does not softly flow on Mary's body, but rather produces a mountain-like form that suggests that the Virgin Mary was assimilated but also culturally associated with that of the native deities, such as Pachamama<sup>6</sup>.

Furthermore, the relative modesty of the attire worn by the Virgin Mary in the Spanish Baroque gives way to a more "royal" attire in the Cuzco paintings, suggestive of her connection with the Inca queen:

The Coya as the queen and consort of the Inka king took as her symbol the moon, perpetuating Andean reverence for the celestial body. The virgin painted by Cuzco artists on the crescent moon continues this association with the queen of the Inkas as the Christian Queen of the Heavens." (DAMIAN, 1995, p. 73)

The intricate gold pattern on her dress too is a hallmark of Cusquenian painting. The stenciling, known as *estufado*, is also often seen in the Cuzco school:

The Cuzco artists' Virgin carries a complex of symbols and concepts derived from Andean beliefs and Inka ritual. It is not necessarily the image itself of the Virgin but her attributes, such as the shape of her dress and its ornamentation that might be considered. Her garments, with their gold patterns and rich array of flowers and jewels; the offerings of Andean flora and fauna which accompany the virgin... including the crescent moon, contribute to the image of the Virgin in Cuzco art as a distinct product of her natural and spiritual environment." (DAMIAN, 1995, p. 51)

Thus, while influenced by European Baroque Art, the artistic production of the Cuzco School steered away from its initial influence and, at the hands of mestizo

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5. **The Assumption of Mary into Heaven**, according to Catholic Church, is the ascending of the Virgin Mary's body into heaven.

6. Pachamama is an indigenous people's goddess from Inca's mythology.

painters, established a style that was independent from the constraints of the European schools.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The distinctive and original features appointed on the image of the *Immaculate Conception* at the Chapel de la Merced are precisely what link the painting to the Cuzco style. The art works attest to the confluence of two diverse cultures: one represented by the colonizer's ability to influence the religious beliefs of the indigenous people; the other, a mestizo expression of the resistance of the colonized, who were able to retain their unique vision of the world and establish some autonomy in their decision to revere their roots and ancestral knowledge.

In short, the characteristics observed in the oil on canvas painting displayed in the Chapel de la Merced clearly connect it to the Spanish Baroque art of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century, and more specifically to the art of the Cuzco school developed in one of the most important artistic centers in colonial America. It embodies the popular Catholic imagery of the religious Spaniards, who wished to consolidate their power in the region by disseminating their ideals and religious beliefs, while portraying also the originality of the conquered, evident in the style and decorative techniques of the artists of Cuzco.

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## INDEX

### A

Agnolo Bronzino 35  
Art History 1, 17, 49, 62, 65, 70, 73  
Art of Resistance 1, 2, 14  
Art of Spain 62  
Avant-Garde 2, 3, 5

### B

Barbara Kruger 1, 2, 3, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17  
Baroque Art 38, 51, 52, 60, 61  
Bartolomé Murillo 55, 58, 59, 62

### C

Chapel of La Merced 49, 57  
Colore 39, 40, 42, 44, 46, 47  
Council of Trent 28, 29, 31, 35, 38, 51  
Counter-Reformation 28, 30, 31, 32, 36, 37, 51, 52, 55, 62

### D

Decorum 28, 31, 34, 38, 60, 70  
Defense Mechanisms 19, 24  
Diego Quispe Tito 50  
Diego Velázquez 62, 65, 72  
Disegno 39, 40, 42, 43, 44, 46, 47

### F

Francisco Pacheco 55, 56, 62  
Francisco Zurbarán 55, 58, 59

### G

Giorgio Vasari 43  
Gustave Courbet 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 16, 17

### I

Immaculate Conception 30, 49, 55, 56, 57, 58, 59, 60, 61

### J

Jacob Lawrence 1, 2, 3, 6, 7, 8, 9, 16, 17

## L

Las Meninas 62, 65, 66, 67, 68, 69, 70, 71, 72

Leonardo Da Vinci 36, 39, 41, 42, 43, 46

Ludovico Dolce 43, 47

## M

Michelangelo 10, 31, 32, 33, 36, 38, 39, 42, 43, 44, 46

## P

Pablo Picasso 1, 2, 3, 9, 10, 11, 16

Pachamama 60

Propaganda 3, 28, 29, 30, 50, 52

Protestant Reformation 28, 30, 51, 64

Psychoanalysis 18, 19, 20, 21, 27

## R

Raphael 36, 43, 44, 46

Religious Painting 62

Religious paintings 28

Renaissance Art 31, 36, 38, 39, 47

Rene Magritte 18, 19

## S

School of Cuzco 49, 50, 53

Sigmund Freud 18, 19, 27

Spanish Baroque 49, 50, 51, 57, 60, 61

Surrealist Movement 18

## T

Tintoretto 36, 37, 39, 47

Titian 36, 39, 43, 44, 45, 46, 47

## V

Venetian painting 39



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