Aaron Hyman

Rubens in a New World: The Role of Flemish Prints in the Transatlantic Spanish Empire

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I traveled to Cuzco, Peru to perform preliminary research for my dissertation, entitled “Rubens in a New World: Print, Authorship and the Slavish Copy.” In the early modern period, Flemish prints flooded the Spanish colonies of the New World. Latin American churches and museums are filled with paintings that are copied from European prints. My dissertation explores the way that compositions by Peter Paul Rubens, the famed Flemish painter and Catholic propagandist, were received and reconfigured in the Spanish colonies. I use this transatlantic frame to reassess the terms through which early modern authorship has been understood: originality, invention, replication, and the slavish copy. The print was received differently and unleashed new paradigms of authorship in different parts of the New World. Prints include extensive information about their authors, patrons, and places of production along their bottom edge. But when the print entered different cultural contexts, with different artistic landscapes, this information could be understood differently. European paradigms of authorship could be reconfigured or forgotten altogether.

Rubens, the consummate authorial genius of Europe’s early modernity, becomes a lens through which to understand, in extreme contrast, the often anonymous craftsmen who reconstituted his printed compositions in paint across the Atlantic. What we might now consider very strange things could happen to “Rubens” in a New World. Artists born in the Americas could imagine him and his work in unusual ways, modeling their own practices on a Europe they only knew in black and white; or his compositions could be repeated so often that they lost their connection to Rubens altogether, becoming consummate colonial works of art. Having shed Rubens, in their authorless state, his compositions could even become miracle-working. My research charts how the movement of objects through space created new possibilities for meaning; and how these objects placed both limitations on and opened up new avenues for New World artists to define their own artistic production. Notions of originality, copying, reproduction and the efficacy of the religious image were reconfigured through this artistic traffic. But I also insist that being attentive to these transformations on New World soil actually helps us better understand artistic production of Europe as well. I therefore look back across the Atlantic in order to use these Latin American paradigms to complicate, reevaluate, and give a more robust account of how the work of painters was understood, much more generally, in the early modern period. In turn, the project is able to challenge models for thinking about early modern authorship, which has been a prominent theme of art historical research in the last several decades.

This summer provided the opportunity to conduct a preliminary investigation of the archival holdings in Cuzco, Peru, one of the central areas of focus for my project. My initial plan was to read as many artistic contracts as possible in order to explore both the ways that European prints contractually entered artistic practice, and how the work of painters, and artisans was discussed in period terms more generally. No artistic treatises were written in the viceregal Americas and very little commentary on painting from the period survives; artistic contracts therefore provide a rare insight into the working conditions of artists and the expectations of their patrons. It quickly became clear, however, that I would have to substantially widen my source base. It did not take long, while working in Cuzco’s Archivo Regional, to realize that most of the known notary documents related to the production of art — cataloged and annotated in two Peruvian publications — have been stolen or “misplaced.”

The realization that so many documents were gone and no longer available for scrutiny was a sad discovery and a significant setback. The notary archives of Cuzco’s Archivo Regional are hardly cataloged; a single, slim folder lists all of the 16th- and 17th-century notary *legajos*, bound books of documents, simply with the name of the notary and the year(s) of the documents the book contains. Locating a specific type of document is therefore a painstaking task. Each morning I would request a notary book, from within the temporal span of my project, and proceed page by page, searching through every document in the massive volume (roughly 600–1,000 folios). Since a large number of artistic contracts were cataloged and then went missing, coming across contracts that had been overlooked by not one, but two Peruvian catalogers was a rarity.

In turn, I started to think about the ways that other types of documents would shed light on the reproduction and reception of art. Wills, probate inventories, and dowries were surprisingly useful as they gave a sense of the display and collecting practices in colonial Cuzco, which have hardly been studied. These documents revealed the sheer quantity of art that the residents of the city owned and how this ownership cut across both class and ethnic lines. They also pointed to the ways in which repetition was a perfectly normal part of art viewership; it is typical, in fact, to find many renditions of a single subject, or of a specific miracle-working virgin, in a household’s collection. And when taken as a group, inventories and dowries point to the very limited range of art-making in the city; most people owned the same kinds of paintings and were used to seeing, perhaps even came to expect to see, the same types of objects in the houses of their neighbors and in the local parish. These are incredibly useful insights as they help me situate the European print within a landscape of artistic production and viewership. What happened when a Rubens, prized precisely for its singularity and originality, entered an artistic milieu based on repetition and replication? After my summer archival research, I have found a foothold to begin answering this question, which is central to my dissertation.

I also completed research at the much more thoroughly cataloged Archivo arzobispal de Cusco. Despite its organization, research was no less straightforward in this archive. The surviving documents housed there are all surprisingly late, coming down to us from the last century of viceregal rule. This source base made me think about the *longue durée* of the artistic contract and about how collecting and display practices changed in colonial Cuzco during the Bourbon period. The artistic sources at the Archivo arzobispal are too limited to offer a full overview of these concerns, and given the overabundance of documents at the Archivo regional I was not able to complete a comparative investigation, but even this initial study prompted interesting questions for thinking about both the continuity and change of artistic practice in Cuzco and for probing why changes might have occurred in the 18th century.

Some unexpected things resulted from my work in Cuzco’s archives. As an art historian trained in visual examination and interested in the materials of artist production, I became interested in archival documents as objects in their own right. These pages bear the traces of their colonial use, of being sealed with wax, folded into self-contained packets, placed in envelopes, tucked into the drawers of desks, etc. I started to think about the lives of these documents and how they functioned as material objects in the personal and bureaucratic spaces of colonial society rather than simply as spaces for the registration of abstracted ideas. Thinking closely about these issues with a graduate student (Matthew Goldmark, Spanish Literature, UPenn) whom I met in the archives, we devised a proposal for a panel at this year’s meeting of the Latin American Studies Association conference, which has drawn the attention of senior scholars across several disciplines.

While in Cuzco, I took the opportunity to travel to other sites of important artistic production during the colonial period. These cities are of potential interest for my dissertation project, but I also simply wanted to familiarize myself with other colonial urban centers, which I will be expected to teach about as a professor in courses on colonial Latin American art. To this end, I spent a long weekend in Arequipa, focusing on the city’s unusual tradition of particularly ornamented architecture. I also took a nearly week-long trip to La Paz, Bolivia, returning to Cuzco via the towns along the edge of Lake Titicaca (Copacabana, Pomata, Juli, Chuquito and Puno). Artworks and ideas generated from both of these trips will be included in a talk I am giving at this year’s meeting of the College Art Association conference in Chicago in February.