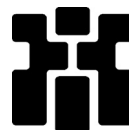




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Article

The art of being a colonial *letrado*: Late humanism, learned sociability and urban life in eighteenth-century Mexico City



El arte de ser un letrado colonial: humanismo tardío, sociabilidad docta y vida urbana en la Ciudad de México en el siglo XVIII

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ABSTRACT

This study treats the social and specifically urban context of late humanism in eighteenth-century Mexico City and New Spain. Through the careful reconstruction of the lives of particular scholars, it argues that the specific configuration of urban space (including colleges, libraries, print shops and personal dwellings) should be taken into account when understanding important monuments in the cultural history of Mexico, like the *Bibliotheca Mexicana* of Juan José de Eguiara y Eguren. This distinct urban culture, in turn, was influenced by larger patterns of circulation in books, ideas and people that gave the late humanist culture of Mexico City both an internal coherence and made it an integral part of a larger cultural sphere.

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R E S U M E N

Palabras clave:

Historia urbana
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 República de las letras
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 Letras clásicas

El estudio aborda la vida social y urbana de los llamados «letrados» del siglo XVIII en la Ciudad de México y la Nueva España. A través de distintos casos específicos se observará el papel de la configuración del espacio urbano (inclusos colegios, bibliotecas, talleres de imprenta y redes sociales urbanas) que permiten un entendimiento más profundo de monumentos importantes de la historia cultural de México, como la *Bibliotheca Mexicana* de Juan José de Eguiara y Eguren. Esta original cultura urbana cayó bajo la influencia de redes de circulación más grandes que incluyeron libros, ideas y personas, que dieron a la cultura humanística de la capital virreinal tanto una coherencia interna como una posición en un ámbito cultural más amplio.

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Introduction

In the frontispiece of *Escudo de armas de México* (1746) of Cayetano de Cabrera y Quintero (1698–1775), angelic putti emerge from a break in the clouds carrying the venerated image of the Virgin of Guadalupe, which brings relief to the inhabitants of Mexico City in the midst of the *matlazahuatl* epidemic.¹ In this engraving by Baltasar Troncoso y Sotomayor (1725–1791) (Fig. 1) after a sketch by the *morisco* artist of Spanish and mulatto descent, José de Ibarra (1685–1756), the Guadalupe floats above an idealized cityscape that recalls (but does not represent) both the center of Mexico City and the suburb of Tepeyac, where this Mexican Madonna is said to have appeared to the *indio* Juan Diego in 1531.²

The domes on the left evoke both the city's monumental cathedral and the future “collegiate” church of our Lady of Guadalupe, while the brick façade of the church on the right appears to be made of *tezontle*, a local volcanic rock used in the construction of a number of churches and convents throughout Mexico City.³ The mountains in the background, in turn, are reminiscent of the hill of Tepeyac or the mountains that surrounded the Valley of Mexico. Flanked by these impressive natural features and man-made structures, a typical depiction of plague victims occupies the middle ground. In the center of the scene lies a bare-breasted women cradling a child who lies face down on the ground, while a half-observed figure with a hat and walking stick leans on a wall.⁴ Although they represent victims of all ages and both genders, in these highly classicizing figures of plague victims Troncoso does not hint that those of indigenous descent were the most affected by this deadly outbreak of typhus. Perhaps the artist agreed with Cabrera that the *indios* had been justly struck down for their excessive consumption of *pulque*, a pre-Columbian alcoholic drink made from the maguey plant that was closely associated with disorder and idolatry.⁵ In contrast to this scene of human misery, the foreground is occupied by the members of the city council (*cabildo secular*). These were the well-dressed gentlemen who in May 1737 had sought the intercession of the Virgin of Guadalupe to combat the plague, and, after the remission of the pestilence, officially recognized her as the patron of Mexico City, subsequently paying for the printing of Cabrera's account of the events in an act of pious commemoration.

¹ On the Virgin of Guadalupe, see Peterson (2014) and Conover (2011). The epidemic is described in Molina del Villar (2001).

² On Cabrera and Ibarra, see Mues Orts (2001); Mues Orts (2006, pp. 70–82); Toussaint (1965). On Troncoso, see Donahue-Wallace (2000, pp. 65–7).

³ Rodríguez Morales (2011).

⁴ Boeckl (2000, pp. 107–08).

⁵ Cabrera y Quintero (1746, p. 72).

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