

The Virgin of Guadalupe: A Painting of New Spain

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Icons of the Virgin of Guadalupe are everywhere today, and not only in Mexico. Her cult as a religious icon long ago crossed the ocean, and has spread throughout the world. We see her stamped on T-shirts and on the sides of trucks, gracing shopping bags and designer clothes, and on any number of commercial products. Artists, too, are constantly reworking her outlines and characteristics into new creations. [Editor's note: Readers should consult the online resource "Proyecto Guadalupe" (<http://proyectoguadalupe.com/iconos.html>) for a selection of colonial and modern images of the icon.]

All of these uses of the Virgin of Guadalupe involve separating her image from its initial physical support on a cloth surface and putting it somewhere else. Modern reproductive techniques are, of course, crucial in these relatively recent developments. Nevertheless, from the very beginning of its story in sixteenth-century New Spain, questions about the nature of the original image of the Virgin of Guadalupe, the process of its making, its materiality, and its reproductions have repeatedly surfaced. Although I long resisted taking up the theme of the Virgin of Guadalupe as a topic for art historical inquiry, eventually it was impossible to avoid, especially when, about eight years ago, I became interested in studying the question of models and their copies, and the problem of originality in the art of New Spain. There can be little doubt that, of all the paintings of the Spanish New World, the Virgin of Guadalupe is the one that has been the most reproduced. It thus provides ample material for the study of originals and copies. Here, following the chronological order of the painted and written sources, I shall review some of the paths down which the art historical examination of many colonial versions of the Virgin of Guadalupe has led.

The Document of 1556

The most familiar narrative of the Virgin of Guadalupe is the story of how the Virgin Mary appeared to the Indian Juan Diego in 1531, only ten years after the Spanish conquest of the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlán, now Mexico City. The apparition took place in the countryside north of Mexico City, at a place called Tepeyac. Mary told Juan Diego to inform the bishop that she wanted a church built for her there. The bishop asked Juan Diego for proof of the apparition, which the Virgin provided after various episodes that included the healing of Juan Diego's sick uncle. She told Juan Diego to pick flowers on the nearby hill, and to take them in his cloak to the bishop. When Juan Diego went to the bishop's palace and opened his cloak the flowers fell to the ground, disclosing the image we know.

This narrative is not represented in painting until the middle of the seventeenth century. However, a relatively early written record of the image itself exists. It occurs in a 1556 collection of testimonies concerning a sermon that had just been preached on September 8, feast of the Nativity of the Virgin, by the provincial of the Franciscan order in New Spain, fray Francisco de Bustamante, in the chapel of San José de los Naturales in Mexico City. Fray Francisco disapproved of the archbishop's promotion of the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe as miracle worker, because, he said, it was harmful to the faith of the natives, whom the Franciscans had struggled hard and long to keep from practicing idolatry. Now, according to the friar, Archbishop Alonso de Montúfar, a Dominican, who had recently arrived in New Spain, was promoting a suburban cult to an image at Tepeyac. The Virgin was allegedly performing miracles, and her

sanctuary north of Mexico City had become very popular especially with Spanish colonists. Note that at this date no one referred to the image itself as a miracle. Not surprisingly, Bustamante's sermon had caused a "scandal"—the word used in the documents. In front of the viceroy, who was in the congregation, the Franciscan friar demanded that whoever was responsible for the "invention" of the miracle stories attributed to the Guadalupe image should be punished. The crown, because of its privilege as patron of the church, had the right and duty to set things straight and avoid damaging the faith of the natives. Archbishop Montúfar obviously felt threatened and called in witnesses for a formal report. Thus, from its beginnings, it is clear that the history of Guadalupe involved different religious authorities and their use of images.

Furthermore, the 1556 document also identifies a native artist as the maker of the image at Tepeyac: "Marcos, indio pintor," he is called. We have recently learned a bit more about a sixteenth century native painter named Marcos who may well be this man. Three years before the sermon an individual calling himself Marcos Griego, "Marcos the Greek," had come before a magistrate in Mexico City to legalize ownership of a house he had just purchased. Marcos Griego identified himself as a painter, presented his case to the Spanish official through an interpreter, and left a remarkable signature. It is a cross flanked by two lions, expertly rendered in a few lines of black ink, references no doubt to the lion that is the symbol of the evangelist Saint Mark, and Marcos's patron saint. The same Marcos Griego appears once again in a 1572 document in which the native painter declares himself to be fifty-five years old. That is, he had been born in 1517, two years before Cortés began the conquest of Mexico, and he would have been around forty at the time of the Bustamante sermon. Marcos was also the name of the artist who in 1564 made the main altarpiece of San José de los Naturales, where the 1556 sermon was preached; this was praised in its time as "marvellous," much better than any Spanish work. Further, as many assume, Marcos Griego may well be the same person as Marcos Aquino cited by the conquistador, Bernal Díaz del Castillo, in his *History of the Conquest of New Spain*, as a great painter, comparable to Apelles. Indeed, Marcos Griego may possibly have acquired his Spanish name in memory of the great classical Greek master Apelles. Finally, Marcos Griego is also generally assumed to be the artist Marcos Cípac mentioned in other texts. These bits of information, piecemeal as they are, provide the basis for the association of the Virgin of Guadalupe with native painters.

Finally, the 1556 document shows concern with the status of natives in their colonial context. This was a difficult and potentially conflictive situation, and in various parts of the testimonies contrasts and differences between Spaniards and natives come to the surface. There is the question of language: Marcos needed an interpreter in 1553, but the archbishop in 1556 also needed an interpreter on his visit to Tepeyac, because he did not know Náhuatl, the Aztec language. Different religious worlds on either side of a cultural divide are also evident: Archbishop Montúfar and his Spanish and criollo witnesses (people of Spanish ancestry) saw as natural and beneficial the need for a place of religious pilgrimage near Mexico City, like that of the Virgin of Atocha on the outskirts of Madrid—one of them mentions this specifically—in order that the colonists might combine amusement with devotion on holidays. They seem to be unaware of, or unconcerned with, the prehispanic cult to the female deity called Tonantzin at Tepeyac, the site of the Guadalupe chapel. For Spaniards without extensive knowledge of native cultures the Guadalupe sanctuary was a welcome novelty in New Spain, recalling the Old World; for the natives the opposite may have been true. They found nothing new in a religious cult at Tepeyac, even if its content had taken on a different face and form.

The conflicts among authorities over the use of the image, and the cultural divide between natives and Spaniards, are problems that run through the many stories of this image throughout the viceregal period and later. For art historians, however, it is particularly interesting that the documents generated in response to Bustamante's sermon make various references to the actual production and existence of paintings. Not only is a particular artist—Marcos—named, but witnesses, following Bustamante, make direct references to the materials of art: stone, canvas, pigments, and wood. One individual states that Bustamante, in order to downplay the importance of the Guadalupe painting, had said that there was one like it in the cathedral of Mexico City. He does not seem to have meant that it was a copy of the Tepeyac image, but simply to indicate that the type was common. Indeed, it must have been, because there are to this day several other images of the Virgin produced by native artists in sixteenth century New Spain that resemble the Guadalupana. It is, after all, a representation of the Immaculate Conception, at a moment when its iconography was not so clearly distinguished from the Assumption of Mary, patroness of the cathedral.

A question that presents itself, on reading these documents, is to what extent, and how, did the fact that Marcos was a native affect the perception and reception of his work? The name of "Marcos, indio pintor," is mentioned only by one witness in the 1556 reports; the others all talk about "un indio pintor," without a proper name, and always in the context of statements about how it is wrong to lead the natives to think that a painting made by an Indian performs miracles. This dismissal of Marcos has echoes of the discussions about the status of native painters in the first ordinances of the painters' guild taking place in Mexico City at the very same time; these were in revision precisely in 1556, and were promulgated the following year. The Spaniards, including the new archbishop, who were promoting the establishment of a painters' guild, were concerned with orthodoxy, that is, with the correct representation of sacred persons and stories. These were, after all, the years of the Council of Trent, and they were worried about poorly informed native artists. However, no doubt the artists of European origin in Mexico City were also concerned about commissions and the market, and were looking out for their interests. There was even talk about excluding the natives from the guild. Marcos Griego, who most probably had been trained in a Franciscan monastery school, was formidable competition, as attested by the praise heaped on him a few years later, in 1564, for the altarpiece of San José de los Naturales. Furthermore, judging from his signature, he knew it. The process by which the name "Marcos" becomes a pair of lions flanking a cross and his signature in a legal document reveals someone who was well versed and confident in word and picture plays.

Early Copies

For art history, everything that happens after the first Guadalupe painting is a question of copies, but copies in art are rarely a simple matter. The first known copy of the Virgin of Guadalupe is dated 1606, fifty years after the Bustamante sermon and its discussion. The image of the Virgin is substantially the same in every detail. Something extremely important obviously had happened, however, because the 1606 picture is, indeed, a copy of the image of the Virgin, but it is not a copy of the original painting. The Virgin is in the same position and has the same attributes, but she is not in the sky among the clouds. She is on a piece of cloth that is clearly distinguished from the canvas on which it is painted. In other words, a narrative of the Virgin of Guadalupe as a miraculous image not made by human hands must have existed by 1606, when this work was painted. The parallel to the story of the Veronica—Christ's face imprinted on the cloth with which the pious woman wiped his face as he went up to Calvary—is unmistakable.

Just as Christ's face miraculously appeared on Veronica's cloth via direct contact, so the Virgin of Guadalupe miraculously appeared on a cloth.

We don't know exactly how this new Guadalupe iconography came about, but the 1606 painting is proof that an apparition story existed by that date. Fortunately, the painting is not only dated, it is signed by Baltasar de Echave Orio, one of the most famous Spanish painters in Mexico City at the time, and we also know that it was in the church of San Francisco. Echave was a Basque who had arrived in New Spain in the 1580s. He was a learned man, who not only painted but wrote. Although he never wrote about painting, or about the Virgin of Guadalupe, this representation demonstrates that he understood very well what the issues were. He rendered the Virgin carefully, smoothly, with clear outlines and details, and, most importantly, he distinguished her still, fixed figure from the painted cloth on which her image appears. Its surface at the margins looks rough and ruffled, and it hangs loosely, especially at the edges. In other words, by his manner of painting he distanced the heavenly figure from the earthly cloth. He placed his name on the margins of the cloth, of course, no doubt partly in humility, but also because there the broad brushstrokes are visible and call attention to his work and accomplishment; we see his "hand" in art historical terms. Just as important is the fact that, along with the change in the story, there clearly had been a change of mind among the Franciscans about the image.

After the painting of the Virgin of Guadalupe on Juan Diego's cloak by Echave Orio, we have a series of straightforward reproductions of the original Guadalupe throughout the seventeenth century. According to very recent findings, many of these seventeenth century reproductions were painted by native artists. In fact, according to an account from around 1675, the making of authorized copies of the Virgin of Guadalupe was a privilege granted to one native painter at a time, one selected in a public contest that took place at Tepeyac. These copies by native painters were supposed to be more miraculous than any of the other reproductions that were being made. Some of these simple reproductions were sent to the missions in northern New Spain, the borderlands of what would later become the United States, in order to aid in the conversion efforts of the Franciscans and the Jesuits. These paintings accompanied missionaries, and were themselves missionaries, according to contemporary thinking, in that they aided the priests and effected conversions. Their stories must be understood against the background of the spate of miraculous images venerated throughout the Catholic world at the time, after the reaffirmation of the cult of images at the Council of Trent.

In Mexico City, meanwhile, a new artistic development had taken place. The person of Juan Diego and an explicit narrative had entered the pictures. One of Juan Diego's first appearances is in the narrative sequence of a 1656 altarpiece made for Francisca Ruiz de Valdivieso, lady-in-waiting of the wife of the Duke of Albuquerque, who had become viceroy of New Spain in 1653. Perhaps the story of the apparition was included there because the altarpiece was made to be taken back to Spain where people would not have been familiar with the story. In any case, in this work for the first time an inscription states that the painting had been *touched* to the original. That is, it is a relic. By then the original had long enjoyed the status of a miraculous object, a painting not made by human hands, so its reproductions could be considered relics if they had been in physical contact with it.

The appearance of Juan Diego in the paintings of the Virgin of Guadalupe follows very closely on the publication of Miguel Sanchez's book, *Imagen de la Virgen Maria madre de Dios de*

Guadalupe, in 1648. This told the entire apparition story in a text filled with ingenious biblical and patristic references and pious commentaries. The point was to prove that the Virgin of Guadalupe who appeared to Juan Diego and remained present in New Spain on his cloak was, just like the Woman of the Apocalypse seen by Saint John (Revelation ch. 12), a sign from heaven. The gift of the sign and the continued presence of the Virgin were proof that New Spain was thoroughly Christian and enjoyed the special favor of the mother of God. This was an affirmation of positive New World identity since it went beyond anything claimed for any European image of the Virgin. Sánchez was the written source for many of the representations of the Virgin of Guadalupe that followed, which often included the apparition story and a description of the sanctuary. The image required a story, and writers and painters provided it.

Another crucial contribution by Sánchez to the history of art was that he made generous use of the vocabulary found in texts about painting, couching his entire argument in terms of originals and copies. He also placed enormous emphasis on a discussion of how precisely the painting had been made. He is eloquent on the role of the roses, indeed of flowers in general, and painters like Juan Correa took him up eagerly. Sánchez, the writer, is careful to state that the Virgin took the flowers from Juan Diego, and gave them back to him with her own hands. When the Indian opened his cloak, the bishop saw in it “a sacred forest, a miraculous spring season, an oasis of roses, lilies, carnations, irises, broom, jazine and violets, and all of them, falling from the cloth, left on it the painting of the Virgin Mary, Mother of God.”

At least two art historical points need to be made here. One is that Sánchez wrote and these works were painted right at the time when a particular type of devotional Flemish painting, that of the sacred figure surrounded by flowers, had become popular in Spain, and had passed to New Spain as well. It was a nice fit for the Virgin of Guadalupe. Indeed, it is likely that Sánchez knew this type of painting. Artists like Juan Correa certainly did, since they showed all sorts of flowers in their representations of the Virgin of Guadalupe, including tulips, a sure sign of Netherlandish influence. The second point is that all the concern about how the painting had actually been made necessarily interested and included painters. Artists were aware of the discussions around the genesis of the miraculous image, and surely they were also acutely conscious of the social and economic opportunities available to them as a result of the clamor for reproductions which only they could provide.

Sánchez attributed the production of the image to the physical contact between Juan Diego’s cloak and the flowers he gathered for the Virgin, which she then handed back to him with the order to take them to the bishop. He downplays, however, the human and material factors in the making of the image. Unlike other famous images of the Virgin, this one, he insists, was not painted by a human, not even by Saint Luke; it had to have been painted by God, by the Virgin herself, or by angels. He boasts that his ideas come from reading Scripture, not from talking with any human painter “with his false, deceptive images” (*imágenes fingidas*). The negative opinion of painting, with its Platonic pedigree, represents one of the major strains of Western thought about images, and was no doubt widely shared by clerical intellectuals in New Spain, for whom painters, especially if they were natives, were no more than craftsmen. Sánchez’s dismissal of “human painters” may be akin to the near dismissal of Marcos, rendered almost anonymous in his own day, when all but one person identified him merely as “an Indian.” We may ask to what extent the desire to distance the Guadalupana from human painters, all the more if they were Indian, might have been a backhanded acknowledgement of their presence and abilities, well known and somewhat feared, or resented, probably.

In fact, the Virgin of Guadalupe could be, and would be, central for the status of all painters in New Spain. There can be little doubt that they were well aware of this. References to the passing of the flowers from Juan Diego to the Virgin and back again into the cloak appear clearly in various representations of the second half of the seventeenth century. Unlike Sánchez, who distanced himself from the material aspects of painting, the painters sought means to draw attention to it. The flowers were the instrument of contact between Mary and the cloth, and their varied hues stood in for the painter's palette. Indeed, artists' manuals at the time discussed the coloring properties of various flowers and plants, so that for painters this aspect of the story was not merely metaphorical. Although, of course, painters were working for patrons and would have been following instructions, not all the resources of pictorial craft and language would have been the object of close scrutiny, and thus artists were able to gloss the Guadalupana in their own ways. They emphasized certain parts of the story, like the role of flowers in producing the image, which called attention to the art of painting. Some of these works were executed shortly after painters in Mexico City had been given the opportunity of examining the original Virgin of Guadalupe in 1666. A commission of painters was asked for an opinion about the painting. The request recognized the fact that artists, and even artisans, might have something significant to say about what was, after all, a painting on a piece of cloth. In their statement the painters declared that the image was miraculous and perfect. They adduced as proof the technical impossibility for any human to paint so well directly on such a rough surface. The "secret" of how to do this could be known to God alone. The allusion to shop talk, in which technical secrets would have been discussed and exchanged, is telling.

Eighteenth-Century Copies

In the eighteenth century the painter Miguel Cabrera finally acquired the kind of status to which artists in Mexico City aspired. He became court painter for the archbishop, a position that had not existed previously. His career was closely associated with the Virgin of Guadalupe. He participated in another inspection of the original painting in 1751, and was permitted to make copies directly from it. By this time the Virgin of Guadalupe was the favorite Marian devotion, not only in Mexico City but in all of New Spain. She had received papal approval in 1747, and the Klauber brothers of Augsburg had provided an official print, often reproduced by painters in Mexico. Thus rococo ornament was added to her depiction, which shows her as an apparition in the sky. Around her is an expanded narrative, with references to categories of saints and to the litany of the Virgin; below are Pope Benedict XIV, who had approved the cult for the universal church, and a personification of New Spain: Europe and America in religious-political terms.

Furthermore, in New Spain clerics and certainly painters never forgot that the Virgin of Guadalupe was a sacred object. In a painting attributed to Cabrera, which commemorates the papal approval of the cult, this point is very clear. Cabrera depicts the most important advocations of the Virgin venerated in New Spain. All of them are represented as apparitions surrounded by clouds in the sky. But the Virgin of Guadalupe is an object. She dominates the composition visually not only by her central and high position, but because of the format and color of her representation. She is on a rectangular, bright white cloth. By the visual means at his disposal, Cabrera demonstrates that he understood very well that all of the other representations were apparitions of the Virgin, but that the Guadalupe is the Virgin, depicted by the hand of God, or by her own power, on Juan Diego's cloak. She is herself on cloth—the only apparition of the Virgin that belongs to the category of images not made by human hands. Also, Cabrera includes the figure of Juan Diego, the only person in the painting who looks up, and sees

her.

This inclusion of Juan Diego is only one instance among many in eighteenth century paintings. Indeed, the insistence on Juan Diego is the most important development in the iconography of the Virgin of Guadalupe in the second half of the eighteenth century. It also brings us squarely back to the three points mentioned in conjunction with the 1556 document: the manipulation and use of the image guided by the clergy and the *criollos*, the problems of the place of the native in New Spain, and the material properties of the original image. For example, in a painting by José de Alcívar of around 1784, Guadalupe as Woman of the Apocalypse/Immaculate Conception is shown appearing to John the Evangelist as well as to Juan Diego. Alcívar's Guadalupe is supported by the great eagle that is both the attribute of Saint John and the preconquest eagle resting on a cactus and devouring a serpent at the spot where Mexico City was to be founded. Three apparitions are thus combined: the Woman of the Apocalypse to Saint John, the preconquest eagle to the Mexicas, and the Virgin of Guadalupe to Juan Diego. The canvas was painted for the monastery of Guadalupe, Zacatecas, where Franciscan missionaries were trained to convert the natives on New Spain's northern frontier. Thus, Alcívar follows Miguel Sánchez's interpretation of the Guadalupe image as a vision on various levels. By making Juan Diego so prominent, however, Alcívar also places before us an ideal "good" Indian. Thus, Juan Diego's presence in Guadalupe paintings in the eighteenth century was not only narrative and allegorical; it was also didactic and moralizing, at the same time that it gave the native an important place.

This brief examination of some texts and pictures shows how every "new" painting of the Virgin of Guadalupe found in scattered churches and collections adds a little to our comprehension of the history of the story. In the same way, the fresh uses that are made of the image revitalize the story, and suggest new interpretations of the problems that have surrounded it from the very beginning. Human creativity and aspirations continue to speak through this one very powerful image.

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