

## Describing Colonial Art: Almerindo Ojeda

By Loren Michael Mortimer - Since the 1950s, the study of Spanish colonial art has fallen out of favor among art historians inclined to view Colonial paintings as merely “slavish” reproductions of European originals. But Almerindo Ojeda, professor of linguistics at UC Davis and director of the Project on the Engraved Sources of Spanish Colonial Art (PESSCA), disagrees. Rejecting what he calls an “inferiority complex among colonial historians,” Ojeda sees important stories embedded in colonial paintings—stories that deserve to be told.



Over the last ten years, Ojeda has collaborated with scholars from around the world to identify more than 3,000 religious images inspired by Old World engravings, including the late seventeenth-century image of St. Catherine of Sienna (see below). At first glance, it is one of the many brightly painted panels that narrate the life of the patron saint of the Monasterio de Santa Catalina de Siena in Arequipa, Peru. The painting depicts the miraculous story of the cloud that transported a young Catherine back to her

home in the Italian city of Sienna after praying in a nearby cave. But look closely at the painting—notice how Catherine’s cloud seems to be conveyed by a rainbow?

Official hagiographies of Catherine’s life make no mention of a rainbow, but its inclusion in this Peruvian painting represents more than mere creative license by its unnamed artist, likely a Native American or mestizo. Basing the painting on a 1607 Flemish engraving by Isaac Briot, the artist—who had presumably never been to Sienna—interpreted the jets of air showing the motion of the cloud as a rainbow, injecting indigenous creativity into a visual narrative that was otherwise carefully controlled by the heavy hand of the Spanish Inquisition.

By matching the original Flemish engraving to the painting it inspired in Arequipa, the [PESSCA](#) project allows scholars to delineate an indigenous worldview concealed in the vivid colors and textures of colonial art.



Source: PESSCA Archive, 2901A



Source: PESSCA Archive, 2901B

## Digital opportunities

While the engraving of St. Catherine is just one of three thousand already identified in the PESSCA archive, Ojeda conservatively estimates this represents less than one percent of colonial paintings in Latin American churches and monasteries.

The largest online archive of its kind in the world, with a global network of collaborators and a partnership with the Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú, the PESSCA project is already a monumental scholarly achievement in the digital social sciences and humanities. New technology will enable the archive to further blur the disciplinary boundaries between the humanities and the social sciences. Ojeda has teamed up with Carl Stahmer, director of Digital Scholarship at UC Davis. [In collaboration with ISS](#), Ojeda and Stahmer are partnering to integrate Arch-V visual recognition software into the PESSCA database. This advanced software not only allows researchers to run advanced image searches—a search that would enable a scholar to cross-reference St. Catherine’s rainbow with thousands of other archived images—but also facilitates new opportunities for crowdsourcing new content in an age of smartphones and digital archives.

Collaborators around the world can submit images for analysis and “run computational analyses of various sorts, such as tracking the flow the images across time and to visually map relationships between images.” This collaboration in turn will create new opportunities for cutting edge scholarship in the social sciences. Generating large data sets will enable scholars to map the connections between European centers of engraving and sites of colonial production.

## An evolving initiative

Beyond tracing the flow of goods and ideas from the economic core to the colonial periphery, many of these engravings originated in places like Venice, Antwerp, and Augsburg—important sites in both the history of capitalism and the Catholic printing industry. Images produced by Catholic engravers made their way from northern, central and southern Europe to the Andes, China, and other far-flung corners of the Spanish Empire. Quantitative data on the diffusion of European art throughout the world reveals new dimensions of an early modern world economic system.

What began with just seven correspondences—that is to say colonial paintings paired with their engraved prototypes—has evolved into a worldwide initiative. Ojeda hopes that this project will foster more direct engagement with colleagues currently working in Latin America, particularly in Peru. He looks forward to the development of an app for smartphones, which will enable the inclusion and participation of new contributors from around the world.

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