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Artistic Dis/Placement in Colonial Maracaibo

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Abstract

Cultic images and miracle-making icons, in particular, worked as pivotal points around which Spanish American communities fashioned their local identities and civic pride. Explorations of the several placements and displacements of artistic images within colonial Maracaibo reveal the ways in which they related to the social and political life of the city. By tracing the shifting physical and social life of Maracaibo's artistic images, the article captures the contesting identities that defined this prosperous colonial settlement.

On the West side hereof is situated the city of Maracaibo, being very pleasant to the view, by reason its houses are built along the shore, having delicate prospects everywhere round about. The city may possibly contain three or four thousand persons, the slaves being included in this number; all which do make a town of a reasonable bigness... Here are also one Parish Church, of very good fabric and well adorned, four monasteries, and one hospital... The commerce or trading here exercised consists for the greatest part in hides and tobacco. The inhabitants possess great numbers of cattle and many plantations, which extend for the space of thirty leagues within the country, especially on that side that looks towards the great and populous town of Gibraltar.(1)

In this way Alexander Exquemelin, the author of the 1678 best-seller *Buccaneers of America*, portrayed the colonial city of Maracaibo, an appealing image that even today lingers in the minds of many travelers. Indeed, a century after its definitive foundation in 1574, the small settlement of Nueva Zamora de Maracaibo had become a prosperous trade center, attractive enough to catch the attention of famous pirates, such as Francis L'Ollonais and Captain Morgan.(2) Although the geographical location offered few natural resources and an inclement weather, its strategic location between the Gulf of Venezuela and Maracaibo Lake offered other amenities – the port of Maracaibo was the converging point of important routes between the South American continent and the main ports in the Spanish and Dutch Caribbean, transforming this inhospitable spot into a major hub for colonial trade.(3)

Through the rivers that traverse the Andes and flow into Maracaibo Lake, Nueva Zamora received the famous tobacco from Barinas, and high quality cacao and leather, destined to the European market via the ports of Cartagena de Indias, Santo Domingo and, specially, Veracruz. In exchange, Maracaibo obtained from these rich centers the necessary tools for the mechanical trades, military weapons and ammunition, sumptuary goods for the comfort of the elites, and in particular important amounts of coined silver.(4) Maracaibo's original settlers were well-aware of this strategic placement, and made it work in their favor – local authorities established a very profitable *alcabala* system that charged high taxes to most ships circulating through Maracaibo's navigation channel, and monopolized exportation products coming from the interior of the continent, branding them as “merchandise from the Port of Maracaibo.”(5)

Among the many manufactured goods coming from different areas of the New World, Maracaibo also received numerous works of art destined to the embellishment of churches, chapels and aristocratic homes. The study of the circulation and placement of those images reveal interesting insights about the socio-political dynamics of the colonial city.(6) Here we should exercise caution, however, as most of what we consider today “artistic” pieces, were at the time crucial cultic instruments, “living” entities around which the city and its citizens constructed their own identities.

In recent years several scholars have discussed how cultic images and, in particular, miracle-making icons worked as pivotal points around which Spanish American communities fashioned their local identities and civic pride.(7)

Thus, I want to explore several placements and, in some cases, displacements of artistic images within colonial Maracaibo as a means to reveal, not so much the spiritual power the inhabitants placed on those images, but the ways in which they related to the social and political life of the city. As Richard Kagan has extensively discussed, during the 17th and 18th centuries the word *ciudad* had a twofold meaning in the Spanish world: *civitas*, the city as a community, and *urbs*, the city as an architectural entity.⁽⁸⁾ I will discuss Maracaibo in the former sense – by tracing the shifting physical and social life of Maracaibo's artistic images, I attempt to capture the contesting identities that defined this prosperous colonial settlement.

According to Richard Kagan, within the Spanish empire, each city strove to define its *genius loci*, the community's particular sense of itself. However, this *genius loci* was not equally shared by every inhabitant of a particular town.⁽⁹⁾ As we will see, Nueva Zamora was not the exception to this rule. By the late 17th century, Maracaibo was divided into two clear spaces, roughly delimited by an axis located in what is today the 8th avenue in the city's historical center.⁽¹⁰⁾ Towards the East stretched out the "Maracaibo blanca," or the area populated by the city's authorities and aristocrats, mostly composed of Spaniards and Creole whites. Like most Spanish colonial cities, this section was organized following a grid plan, with a *plaza* at the center, flanked by the parish church of St Peter and St Paul, the city hall, the market, and other government buildings and houses of the city's elite.

To the West of the city, the "Maracaibo mestiza" concentrated the poorest social groups, most of them of mixed racial background, who lived in the periphery of, but at the same time closely linked to, the "Maracaibo blanca." Its inhabitants were mostly common workers – servants, fishermen, artisans, carpenters, shoemakers, construction workers. Within this section of the city, the shrine of San Juan de Dios catered to the spiritual life of the population.



Fig. 1 Miguel de Cabrera, *The Exaltation of the Regina Societatis Jesu*, 1765. Maracaibo Cathedral. Photo: author.

Within the Spanish empire it was considered that the grandeur and nobility of a city was not so much in their monuments and urban design, but in the piety and religious allegiance of their inhabitants,⁽¹¹⁾ and in colonial Maracaibo this idea found its perfect expression in the significant decoration of its churches. Although most of Maracaibo churches have lost their colonial ornamentation and original cultic images, a complete inventory carried out by Bishop Mariano Martí during his pastoral visit of 1774 reveals interesting details about their artistic belongings.⁽¹²⁾ The main temple of the "Maracaibo blanca," the church of St. Peter and St. Paul, today Maracaibo's cathedral, displayed an important artistic patrimony, featuring 71 paintings, some of them created in the most important artistic center of the New World: the viceroyalty of New Spain (today Mexico). In particular, in the chapel of Our Lady of the Rosary, there was a series of 13 paintings by the New Spanish artist Juan de Villegas, depicting several episodes from the Life of the Virgin.⁽¹³⁾

Another outstanding evidence of the intense commercial exchange between Maracaibo and Mexico in the 18th century, is a painting that is today located in Maracaibo cathedral, but that must have belonged to the Jesuit school at Punta de Arrieta. *The Exaltation of the Regina Societatis Jesu* (fig. 1), painted in 1765 by Miguel de Cabrera, the most important artist of 18th-century New Spain, seems to indicate the ambitious plans the Society of Jesus had for their establishment in Maracaibo – in this monumental composition, the Immaculate

Conception protects with her mantle the most distinguished members of the Jesuit Order: St. Ignatius of Loyola, St. Francis Borgia, St. Francis Xavier, St. Louis Gonzaga, St. Stanislav Koska, among others.⁽¹⁴⁾ During the mid-18th century, the Jesuits repeatedly requested royal authorization to establish a Jesuit college, where the children of the powerful local families could expand their education. However, the project for this institution of higher education was frustrated by the expulsion of the Order from Spanish territories in 1767.⁽¹⁵⁾ It seems, thus, that by importing fine artistic images to decorate their temples, Maracaibo's elites of the 18th century not only reasserted their commercial connections, but also their cultural and spiritual dependence from the most sophisticated Spanish colonial center.

Earlier on, however, Maracaibo's authorities would make use of other means to boost the religious life of the city. Using similar strategies to those that made them an economic power in the Caribbean, in the early 17th century Maracaibo took possession of a prestigious miraculous image that belonged to a competing trade center, monopolizing thus the spiritual life of the region. I am referring here to the famous Black Christ of Gibraltar (fig. 2), whose story is closely tied to the prolonged struggle between the two main centers in Maracaibo Lake, Nueva Zamora and Gibraltar.

According to the legend, on July 20th 1600, the prosperous city of Gibraltar, located in the South of Maracaibo Lake, was attacked and set on fire by a group of Quiriquire warriors. The city church, which was mainly made of wood, quickly burned down. The fire destroyed all the ecclesiastical ornaments, except a wooden Crucifix that was left floating on the air after its supporting cross was consumed by the fire. At the sight of this miracle, the natives fled away, and the image, blackened by the smoke and badly damaged by arrow shots, became known as the "Christ of the Miracle."⁽¹⁶⁾

For safekeeping purposes, the Crucifix was transported to Maracaibo and placed in its parish church, until the town of Gibraltar could be reconstructed. Years later, when Gibraltar's city and temple had been rebuilt, and the inhabitants of Gibraltar reclaimed their miraculous image, Maracaibo refused to comply on the grounds that the devotion to the Black Christ was too rooted in the city as to let the image go. Since both Maracaibo and Gibraltar insisted on their rights over the image, the dispute was taken to the Council of Indies in Seville, which ruled to leave the decision up to the Black Christ himself. The Council disposed that, when the winds were blowing towards Gibraltar, the Crucifix was to be left on a boat situated in a spot in the middle of Maracaibo Lake, equidistant to Maracaibo and Gibraltar. The image would belong, thus, to the city towards which the boat would make its way.

After the Black Christ was subjected to the test, he spoke: the boat steered towards Maracaibo.⁽¹⁷⁾ Some historians have interpreted this arrangement as a smart plot designed by Maracaiberos, since the currents of Maracaibo Lake tend to direct any ship towards the lake's mouth. Incidentally the dispute over the precious relic coincides with a moment when the economic and political rivalry between Gibraltar and Maracaibo were at a peak.

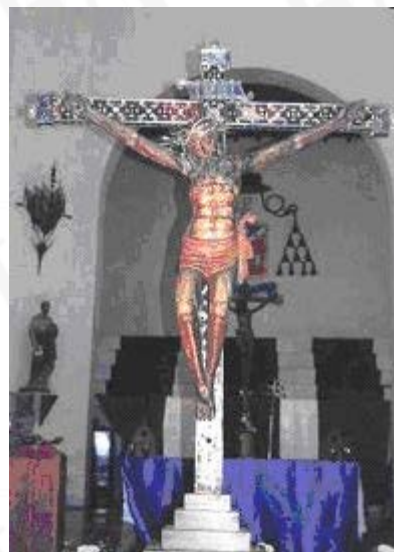


Fig. 2 Anonymous, Black Christ of Maracaibo, late 16th century. Maracaibo Cathedral. Source: "La Santa Reliquia" Maracaibo: obras e historias (http://maracaibozulia.tripod.com/santa_reliquia.htm)



Fig. 3 Anonymous, Our Lady of Chiquinquirá, 18th century. Maracaibo, Chiquinquirá Basilica. Photo: author

At the beginning of the 17th century, the economic power of the two cities was closely linked to their competing jurisdictional interests – Gibraltar, which belonged to the province of Mérida, reported to Santa Fe de Bogotá, while Maracaibo, subscribed to the Captaincy of Venezuela, reported to Santo Domingo. The two lacustrine cities were contending to become the main fluvial outlet to the Caribbean, ensuring, thus, the juicy *alcabala* profits for their respective political heads. Towards 1676, however, the hostilities between the two cities will come to an end, with the annexation of Maracaibo to the Province of Mérida (now named Provincia de Mérida de Maracaibo). Eventually, by the beginning of the 18th century Maracaibo itself would become the capital of the new province, since, in 1717, it was subscribed to the new viceroyalty known as the New Kingdom of Granada (today Colombia).⁽¹⁸⁾

Some years later, the "Maracaibo mestiza" would reassert its position within the city by deploying similar strategies, this time using an image coming from Neogranadine territories. The story about the miraculous apparition of Our Lady of Chiquinquirá in Maracaibo (fig. 3) dates back to the mid-18th century. According to popular tradition, a poor laundress was washing clothes in the lake, when she found a small piece of wood that she took home to use as a lid for a water container. The next morning the lady was awakened by a knocking sound, and when she turned toward the

small panel, she saw a beautiful shiny image of Our Lady of Chiquinquirá stamped on the wood. This was not the first time the iconography of Our Lady of the Rosary flanked by St. Andrew and St. Anthony of Padua had appeared miraculously – indeed the first renovation happened in 1586, when a forgotten painting miraculously recovered its original colors in the Neogranadine location of Chiquinquirá (fig.4).⁽¹⁹⁾

In response to the extraordinary event, Maracaibo authorities decided to carry out a procession to conduce the miraculous image to the parish church of St. Peter and St. Paul. At some point during the procession, however, the image became so heavy that it could not be moved, an event Maracaiberos read as a divine sign the Virgin did not want to establish her definitive home in the aristocratic setting of St. Peter and St. Paul. When deliberating on possible locations, an attendant suggested the shrine of San Juan de Dios, and at that precise moment the panel recovered its normal weight, indicating thus its wish to establish a definitive home at the center of the “Maracaibo mestiza.”(20)



Fig. 4 Alonso de Narváez, Our Lady of Chiquinquirá, 1556. Chiquinquirá, Basilica. Source: “Milagros de la Virgen de Chiquinquirá” (<http://www.colarte.arts.co/colarte/conspintores.asp?idartista=6052>)

According to Gómez Espinoza, however, the real story dates back to the early 17th century, when an official from the Royal Treasury, don Juan de Andrade, was relocated from Santa Fe de Bogotá to Nueva Zamora de Maracaibo, and brought with him an image of Our Lady of Chiquinquirá. He found the shrine of San Juan de Dios in such a poor state that he decided to repair it and place there the Neogranadine image, which fell into oblivion until the miracle story revived its devotional use.(21) As a result of the reputed miracle, between 1767 and 1778, the old shrine was substituted by a temple built in the local *bahareque* technique and covered with roof tiles – the type of construction materials that were used for the temples and buildings of the “Maracaibo blanca.” It seems, thus, that by means of this cultic image the “Maracaibo mestiza” reasserted its presence within the social fabric of the city, establishing a new ritual center that could challenge, and would eventually outshine, the traditional ritual center of Maracaibo’s colonial power.

It is important to note that by means of the miracle story, the “Maracaibo mestiza” did not establish links with the major centers of royal authority, such as Mexico City, but with a modest pilgrimage center in Neogranadine territories. This connection, however, is particularly relevant since, by the same time Chiquinquirá’s miracle legend was taking shape, intense political struggles for the jurisdiction of the Province of Maracaibo had confronted again Venezuela and the New Kingdom of Granada.(22) In 1777, with the creation of the General Captaincy of Venezuela, Maracaibo and the whole Province of Mérida de Maracaibo were integrated to the new political entity. This decision was repeatedly contested by the city of Maracaibo, which had more interests in common with the viceregal center in Bogotá, than with the remote Province of Caracas.

Recent studies have examined how religious icons become important part of a communal identity, since image veneration is one of the means by which believers can participate in the public life of a city. Moreover, the culture of miracle-making images was an arena in which difficult issues of political, economic and religious authority were sorted out in times of crisis.(23) In this light, the particular choice of a Neogranadine image within Maracaibo shifting political context seems to endorse the popular feelings of the city of Maracaibo, which defined its citizenship as linked to New Granada.



Fig. 5 José de Páez, Holy Family with the Trinity, late 18th century. Maracaibo, Church of St Barbara. Photo: author

A final case of artistic dis/placement in colonial Maracaibo can be observed at the very frontier between the “Maracaibo blanca” and the “Maracaibo mestiza.” Originally planned to cater the spiritual needs of the lower classes that populated the area, the temple of St. Barbara was built and decorated between 1747 and 1750 in a humble way (or at least this is what is conveyed in the 1774 inventory by Bishop Mariano Martí, according to which the number of cultic images in the temple was rather limited). During the period 1774-1786, however, with the establishment of a confraternity of Immaculate Conception composed mainly of members from Maracaibo’s aristocracy, the temple suffered several renovations. At this time the church seemed to have received the expensive New Spanish paintings that are still today sheltered in the small temple – one *St Francis*, one

St Joseph, a Holy Trinity, and, more importantly, José de Páez's *Holy Family with the Trinity*(fig. 5).(24)

Interestingly enough, in 1786 the members and leaders of the Confraternity of the Immaculate Conception tried to change the dedication of the temple from St. Barbara to the Virgin of their devotion. As we can imagine, this move encountered strong opposition from the members of the Confraternity of St Barbara, the founding institution from the “Maracaibo mestiza.” Numerous documents describing the confrontation show how the aristocratic elites devoted to the Immaculate Conception sustained their claim over the temple by referring to the expenses they had gone through with its refurnishing and redecoration. Although the outcome of this dispute is not completely clear, it does not seem that the members of the “Maracaibo blanca” could ever repossess this temple at the margins of their area of influence.(25)

This failure of influential social segments within the city becomes understandable when we consider the increasing importance that the mixed population of Maracaibo had acquired towards the second half of the 18th century. According to a census carried out in 1756, 53% of the Maracaiberos were of mixed ancestry, most of them descending from Afro-Hispanic roots and classified under the rubric of “libre” or “pardo”. This means that the “Maracaibo mestiza” mostly comprised free workers, with possibilities for social advancement, and thus more participation in urban life.

On the other hand, the white ruling class of Maracaibo was never as tight-knit as in other regions of the New World. From the 47% of whites, only a 6% sported the honorific treatment of “don” and “doña.” In fact, after the late 17th-century pirate attacks devastated Maracaibo's rising economy, the original founding families of Maracaibo had to share their ruling position with newcomers – Catalans, Basques, and New Spaniards, who, by bringing a new impetus to Maracaibo's economy, caused the political power of the city to be diffused among several sectors.(26)

Indeed, from the end of the 18th century until our days, the spiritual epicenter of the port city displaced towards the “Maracaibo mestiza,” to the temple of San Juan de Dios with its miraculous icon of Chiquinquirá. Ironically, Maracaibo the wealthy city of the Caribbean that attracted the greed of pirates and buccaneers, and that could import expensive paintings from New Spain, structured its civic and religious life around of a humble but “living” image, which could monopolize and respond to the aspirations of an increasingly mixed population.

Notes

1. Exquemelin (1992), 117-118
2. For more information on pirate incursions in the coasts of today Venezuela, see López Zea (2003) and Lucena Salmoral (1994).
3. Several scholars from the Centro de Estudios Históricos at the Universidad del Zulia have discussed the economic dynamics of this region. See Cardozo Galué (1983) and Parra Grazzina (1991).
4. On the commercial connections between the port of Maracaibo and Mexico see Arcila Farías (1950).
5. See Cardozo Galué (1983).
6. For a study on pictorial production and circulation in colonial Maracaibo see Domínguez Torres (1993).
7. See for the case of Perú, Cummins (1996), and for New Spain, Alberro (1988), among others. For an inventory of all the miraculous images of the Virgin that appeared in Venezuelan territories see Nectario María (1930).
8. For the implications of the word “city” in early modern Spain see Kagan (2000), 9-11.
9. Ibid, 44.
10. Vázquez de Ferrer (1986), 8-32.
11. Kagan (2000), 26.
12. The original inventories have been published in their entirety in Martí (1969).
13. Five of these pictorial relics of colonial Maracaibo can still be observed in its cathedral, and one in the Archdiocesan Museum. See Domínguez Torres (1993), 79-82.
14. See the study made by Solache y Llanos (1962-1963).

15. Documents and details about this frustrated project are found in Rey Fajardo (2003).
16. For the full story of this relic see Besson (1973).
17. The devotion to the “Black Christ of Maracaibo” (the name by which the image will be known from that moment on) traveled beyond the Caribbean. The Cathedral of Seville, for instance, has a chapel dedicated to this devotion, with an altarpiece featuring a painted image of Maracaibo’s crucifix.
18. Homick (1985) reconstructs the complete history of these two competing provinces and their subsequent integration.
19. For the full history of the apparition in Colombia see Arizmendi Posada (1986).
20. For complete accounts of the miracle in Maracaibo see Nectario María (1970).
21. Gómez Espinoza (1992), 129-130.
22. Homick (1985), 219-251.
23. See, for instance, Ragon (1995).
24. Domínguez Torres (1993), 95-97.
25. For more information on this dispute see Febres Cordero (1911), 126-163.
26. Homick (1985), 74-83.

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