Artistic Syncretism in Latin America: From Olmec to Spanish Colonialism

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to provide a historic and systematic review of colonial Latin American art. The first half will focus on the ancient arts created by the ancient civilizations that sculpted culture in Latin America centuries before the Spanish were aware another continent existed. The latter portion of the paper will look to the post-colonial period. It will begin by delving into the influence of European artistic styles blending with Latin American culture and style of painting and vice versa. The final goal of this paper is to uncover the syncretism that took place across Latin America with the introduction of a new faith as well as the ancient syncretism between the indigenous cultures. Much of the research that has been done on syncretism focuses heavily on the religious aspect, but this paper will combine religion with art. In the paintings that occurred decades after the Spanish conquest, artists became more comfortable in depicting the incorporation of the Catholic faith into the native beliefs the indigenous population held prior to the invasion in order to create a new practice that is the combination of two separate belief systems.
Introduction

Many people know that the Spanish came to the Americas in the 1500s and conquered the people that had been living there. Lesser well-known is the forced adoption of a new faith and the art the native populations had to create to send back Europe as tribute to the Spanish king. It is difficult for societies to peacefully accept such a fate, and those in Latin America were no exception. So, what did they do to show their resistance? In each work of art, they hid a portion of their faith, whether it was in the use of native flora and fauna or in the less discreet shapes and symbols they painted (Kelemen, 1969). Through the surviving artwork created by these native artists, we know much more about the cultures that lived before the conquest. Much of the hidden symbolism acted as a form of rebellion and loyalty to the indigenous artists’ native beliefs and traditions that the Spanish attempted to eradicate.

The primary physical evidence of ancient civilizations having religions is in their surviving artwork. Painting on canvas either did not exist (for lack of materials) or did not survive the centuries (due to deterioration of materials). Sculpture and wall murals are generally considered separate forms of art by art historians because of the different tools and skills needed to create each one. However, they were more integrated and connected in the pre-colonial societies. The Maya civilization could have begun as early as 600 BCE (Miller, 2012) and, even though they lived 2,500 years ago, is one of the most well-known societies, in part because their artwork was carved into their temples and pyramids (Gomez, 2015). Throughout the centuries before the Spanish arrived, ancient societies had been conquering each other and forming larger, more sedentary groups—societies that could settle down and did not have to rely on following their food sources during migrations. In Mexico, this legacy of indigenous cultural conquest resulted in the most recent group, the Aztec, while further south in the Andes, the Inca slowly
Artistic Syncretism…

conquered surrounding tribes until they controlled nearly the entire Western coast of South America. There were many Latin American societies who lived between the Maya and their descendants, the Aztec and Inca, helping to form the later cultures, and we can trace their existence and legacy through existing artwork. This is an important feature, because it attests to the fact that syncretism existed long before it became obvious with the arrival of the Spanish.

Syncretism can be defined as the integration and incorporation of two religions with each other to form an entirely new belief system. This paper will review a few non-European civilizations, namely the Olmec, Mochica, Maya, Aztec, Tiahuanaco, and Inca and how they seem to have influenced each other. The Olmec and the Maya are some of the oldest civilizations in Central America, with the Aztec living more recently. The Mochica, Tiahuanaco, and Inca lived in South America and offer different experiences than those living further up north. However, the similarities in their artistic styles demonstrate the commonalities between societies that are separated by distance as well as the widespread integration of European styles, beliefs, and ideas—syncretism—into the civilizations that survived, long before they were forced to adopt and integrate Catholicism and the European ideals in a new wave of syncretism.

**Literature Review**

It is important to understand a society’s way of life before it was interrupted and altered by invading forces to fit their ideals. The Spaniards would not have been so adamant about teaching the indigenous population the Catholic faith had they not just undergone the *Reconquista* back home, where they now had religious freedom for their faith after the Muslim Moors were expelled. During the Moorish occupation of the Iberian Peninsula, there were numerous wars and conflicts for who would control the land. Eventually, after nearly 700 years,
the Spanish were able to expel the Moors and regain and rebuild their newfound freedom, culture, and religion that had caused differences for so long (Kagay, 2003). The Moorish people that had been living on the Iberian Peninsula were Muslim, which in part caused the extreme devotion to the Catholic faith once the Moors had been expelled. This is one of the main reasons the Spanish wanted to convert as many natives as they could when they came to the Americas (Kagay, 2003). They had found so many people they could influence and bring to the true faith of Catholicism, more importantly before other people and religions could get to them.

The polytheistic religions of the native populations that lived in the Americas long before the Europeans knew this continent existed were suppressed and nearly lost after the unrelenting Catholic Europeans came on their ships. Because the Spaniards believed their faith to be the “true” religion (Catholicism) and the polytheistic religions of the natives’ as inferior, each new shipment of Europeans brought more conquistadores and missionaries to convert and save the indigenous populations. In the south, the conquistadores were able to intertwine their religion with the Andean faith through the common belief that there was a creator god who would return. Some Europeans believed that these pagans, because they did not follow Catholicism, weren’t even human, which made it easier to exploit them for physical work. On the other hand, there were some who believed the natives once did follow the “true” faith and had just fallen from grace or they just naturally knew there was a God (Poole, 2005). After the natives were forced into submission, they were required to work for the Spanish, as slaves and later as artists for the Spanish king.

Syncretism is the mixing and melding of various aspects of different cultures. Rather than one culture completely replacing another, syncretism recognizes how aspects of conquered cultures are incorporated into the conquering culture’s society. An example would be the ways in
Artistic Syncretism…

which European pagan holidays, such as fir trees being used to decorate homes during the winter solstice, have been incorporated into the Christian tradition to become Christmas trees. The general term of “syncretism” is often used as a synonym for religious syncretism specifically because not much scholarly work has been done on other forms of syncretism. Therefore, though the most commonly researched form of syncretism is religious, this paper will focus on how it is used in art, which will include religious syncretism as well. Unless the sources specifically mention syncretism, there is limited discussion of the works of art that are clearly more than just the integration of two cultures. An article by Smith (1974) discusses various types of religious syncretism in Latin America, though not necessarily related to art, emphasizing that the cultural groups “no longer exist in a pure state, and are not even easily distinguished” (p. 5). That is to say that the cultures that have existed in these regions are no longer single, separate cultures, but rather a combination of their current culture and the cultures of previous civilizations melded together.

An analysis of the artistic styles among various pre-colonial civilizations leads many anthropologists and art historians to believe that these cultures shared and spread their ideas and styles with each other across the continent. Even though Mexico was one of the main sites of Spanish invasion, it was the least susceptible to changes in artistic style because the invaders stayed more in the southern region than in the northern (Donahue-Wallace, 2008). While the native painters were forced to create Catholic works, they were still able to give them a touch of their own culture; the subjects of the paintings are generally dressed in common mestizo clothing (Sullivan, 2007) and the background flora is almost always native to Latin America. Sculpture was the prominent form of art in the early civilizations, long before the Spanish invaded. With no ancient canvas painting available, there is not much to compare to colonial painting, which was
the dominating form of art during the 1500s CE. There are, however, a limited number of ancient wall paintings that can be compared as an ancient form of painting, not unlike modern-day canvas painting. Not only will the styles of the precolonial civilizations be compared but also stylistic changes brought about by the invasion of the Spanish, and how the styles changed throughout time, before the Spanish came, whether that be naturally or through conquest by other native populations.

Beginning with the civilizations that predate the classic Aztec and Inca, images were carved into stone slabs more often than separate sculptures standing alone (Bailey, 2005). Prior to the conquest, the ancient civilizations had used stone for the majority of their sculptures, though occasionally opting for wood, the majority of which has since decomposed. After the Spanish invasion, however, more and more works made of precious metals like silver and gold began to be made (Kelemen, 1969). An important theme that will be present among the following images is the syncretism that took place. Religious syncretism is often talked about in the integration of Catholicism and native religions during colonial times, but syncretism happened centuries before the Spanish set foot in Latin America. The ancient civilizations would go to war and conquer each other, then adopt certain ideas and beliefs of the conquered culture into their own belief system and traditions. The most recent pre-colonial civilizations are the Aztec (in Central America) and the Inca (in South America). Therefore, it is necessary to look at earlier societies to know how the most recent ones were influenced and shaped by their predecessors.
Analysis

Before the Spanish Catholic conquest, each area of Latin America was influenced by different groups of people, with their own set of beliefs and methods. The following images compare various groups that lived around the same time as each other but in different regions, once in the Mexico area and one in the Andes, starting with the oldest civilizations that influenced both. Long before the Aztecs formed in Central America, the most well-known and well-studied group was the Olmec. While the Aztec and Maya are the most well-known recent civilizations, the Olmec were just as active and just as skilled in their art and architecture 3,000 years ago. The Olmec lived about 1200-600 BCE (Scott, 1999) and worked almost entirely in 3D, making free-standing sculptures rather than carvings in stone, or reliefs. The amount of detail put into each work was incredible; faces showed irises (or holes where the iris gem would have been) and facial features of typical Olmec, who had a distinct lip conjoined to the base of the nose.

The statue in [Figure 1] depicts an Olmec man holding a baby version of their Rain God and was carved in a translucent blue-green jade (Miller, 2012). This specific portrayal of the Rain God as a baby appears in Maya art as well, indicating the shared belief system between the civilizations, mostly likely after contact rather than independent religious beliefs. Their main mediums included basalt, made of volcanic rock, and greenstone, which is simply a generalization of the various kinds of green-colored stones (jade, serpentine, and nephrite). A giveaway that sculptures were made by the Olmec is the amount of tattooing and incising,
especially of the face/head. The reason the Olmec people were able to devote time to the arts hundreds of years Before Common Era was because they had already mastered agriculture and containment of their food supply, so they didn’t have to constantly worry about their next meal, giving them time to spare and specialize in different subjects (Miller, 2015).

The figure above is a relatively small sculpture compared to the 17 colossal stone heads that have been found by archaeologists in the regions of La Venta and San Lorenzo, in Mexico, with the most well-preserved head being found in 1970 [Figure 2]. The term “colossal” is not used lightly, as these stone heads generally weigh more than 10 tons. The Olmec used precise rock-on-rock hitting to beat away the imperfections. The largest head weighs over 20 tons and stands more than 11 feet tall (Ellis, 2007), which is not an easy feat to have accomplished by hitting rocks against each other. The most incredible aspect of these heads is that each one has a different facial expression and wears a different helmet. The first head was found in the 1800s and was the first indicator of a civilization older than the Maya. While a lot of speculation occurred regarding where these heads came from, including ideas about Africa or even fanciful speculation about Atlantis, the 1940s archaeologists finally decided they were created by an indigenous society (Ellis, 2007). Today, archaeologists believe these heads are a sort of memorial built to the ancient kings of the Olmec civilization.

Even though there are numerous sculptures of heads made by the Olmec, there still isn’t much knowledge about their lives and history, since most of their artifacts have withered away over the past 3,000 years or been buried under centuries worth of mud, dirt, and natural

Figure 2. Olmec Stone Head #8. Xalapa Museum, Mexico.
landscape erosion. There could still be hidden caves, buried under miles of dirt, that hold centuries worth of artifacts that would enable us to gain insight to their culture, but nothing more than giant heads have been found so far. These stone heads were made of basalt, as mentioned above, from the mountain range near the San Lorenzo area (Ellis, 2007). Though the mountain range is close, the Olmec people still would have had to move these immense rocks miles and miles to the carving station. After years of investigation, it was discovered that these heads were originally thrones of the previous rulers or made from the throne of a deceased king (Miller, 2012). The thrones were rectangle-shaped with a sculpted figure carved into the base in a manner that made it seem like it was carrying the weight of the entire stone throne. The thrones, once the kings had died, were turned onto their sides and the face was then carved into where the seat had been.

Living almost exactly the same time, the Chavín de Huántar inhabited the northern coast of Peru from 900-200 BCE (Scott, 1999). Though the Olmec and Chavín were living nearly 3,000 miles apart, there are still some characteristics of their stonework that are similar. The Chavín also used giant stone slabs to create figures, though they related more to sacred animals than to past rulers. Since stone was not commonly used by the Chavín at this time, they mainly worked with clay. Bennett (1954) states that “carving in the round [three dimensional] is largely limited to the animal and human heads. The stone carving design is thoroughly dominated by the stylistic representation of the feline” (p. 29). Scott (1999) explains the fact that the jaguar, a typical feline representation in the Andes, was already abundant in Olmec art of the same time. Even in the sculpture that is not specifically
feline, certain aspects of the feline can still be seen, whether that be in the shape of the faces or as a design incised on another, the most common of which is a wide mouth with upturned corners (Bennett, 1954). Much of the Chavín sculpture doubled as jars with spouts [Figure 3]. In this image, the spout of the jar is protruding out of the back of a seated man. The man’s face has the feline wide mouth as well as eyes that represent more a cat’s than the people living in the Andes at that time. The pose of the man is a recurring characteristic of ancient sculpture throughout the centuries, both in the Andes as well as in Central America.

Because of the valley landscape, the Chavín people could not have lived there for an extensive time period, indicating the region as more of a religious and ceremonial center (Bennett, 1954). Even though Chavín de Huántar lived long before many of the ancient civilizations that are more well-known, “the Chavín presence identifies…the first major evidence of the integration of previously separate regional cultures of the Central Andes into a unified elite culture widely spread horizontally across the geography (Scott, 1999, p. 38).

Much like the Olmec civilization, the Maya based the features of their sculptures on themselves, specifically a Maya aristocrat, who had a flat forehead, small chin, and long ears (Kelemen, 1969). A common representation that appears throughout Central American art is the jaguar. [Figure 4] depicts a figure, potentially a Maya aristocrat, sitting on a jaguar throne. Though the execution of the art is different, the relief depicts a figure that is seated, the position is not quite the same as with the Chavín, but the Maya could have carved a standing figure rather than a seated one, suggesting there could have been shared ideas so long ago. Their medium of choice was mostly
limestone rather than precious gems. In addition to the aristocrat, they also sculpted their gods, many of which took on both animal and human forms. This idea is called anthropomorphism, and was not often seen in the Mexico area. In continuing to connect the ancient cultures, Kelemen (1969) states that, referring to a specific piece of Maya art, it is “an example of how the iconography from different cultures has been adopted and blended” (p. 78). Throughout their long history, the Maya sculptures became more and more detailed and decorated, as if their goal was to tell a story with a piece of rock. Many stone reliefs—or stela—were connected to altars, often to the earth god from which the material came (Kelemen, 1969). Though, as mentioned above, the Maya existed in the early centuries of the Common Era, the majority of their flourishment occurred between 300 and 900 CE, right up until their disappearance (Miller, 2012). Although traditional Maya culture waned nearing 900 CE, archaeological and anthropological research has not found a clear and viable explanation for the seeming disappearance of the Maya classic culture.

In the past 80 years, there hasn’t been much change in the argument as to where the Maya went and what happened to them. There are generally two different streams of thought regarding the “collapse” and these are a collapse of the elite and a collapse of the entire system. Within the “elite collapse” explanation are theories that include foreign invasion, internal warfare, and peasant revolts. However, within the “total system collapse” explanation are two more subdivisions: ecological factors and non-ecological factors (Webster, 2002). That is to say that natural disasters such as hurricanes, earthquakes, or volcanoes as well as human degradation of the environment, could have caused their disappearance. The non-ecological theories seem to make the most sense because the first theory involves the disruption and destruction of trade networks, which would cause the population to move to find the goods they need. The second
non-ecological theory is that of self-destruction in that the Maya could have foreseen their demise with their advanced calendric work and moved onward before that happened, or that they relied too heavily on shamans and the mystical that they were advised to deplete their resources to appease the gods and there was nothing left over for them to survive (Webster, 2002). Though the majority of the population did disappear for whatever reason, a large enough number survived and mixed with other cultures. Therefore, because the presently understood Maya civilization had ended, though it is one of the most important and well-studied ancient societies, they never got the opportunity to interact with the Spanish conquistadores in the 1500s CE.

Similarly, in the Mochica region (present-day northern Peru), there exists a clay figure in the same position as the kneeling man done by the Chavín [Figure 5]. The Mochica people lived somewhere around 400-1000 CE (Bennett, 1954). Though the body position is the same, the clothing and facial features are different from the Chavín and from the following examples. This could suggest the adoption of styles by future civilizations after finding Mochica pottery or of the Mochica borrowing ideas from older civilizations such as the Chavín. The Mochica didn’t necessarily sculpt such a detailed jar; their better-quality ceramics were made form molds (Bennett, 1954). An interesting comparison that can be made here is the dual practice of sculpture as something to be admired and a useful tool. Both the Chavín de Huántar and the Mochica ceramics doubled as jars of some sort whereas the Olmec did not and there is limited free-standing Maya sculpture to begin with, let alone such highly decorated jars.

Perhaps the most important aspect of the Mochica is that the pattern of their ceramics and artwork “contained many of the elements which appear later in the Inca political empire”
(Bennett, 1954, p. 48). That is to say, when the Mochica culture faded away, whether it be over time or through conquest, many aspects of their civilizations were adopted into later cultures, namely the Inca.

According to Miller (2012), the Olmec were potentially a “mother culture from which all others derived” (p. 25). If that were true, it could greatly explain why so many cultures across the Americas have such similar artwork. Miles to the south of the Olmec’s home territory, in present-day northwestern Bolivia and southeastern Peru, and centuries after the Olmec, around 1000-1300 CE, the Tiahuanaco area was growing in popularity as a religious pilgrimage site, similar to the Chavín de Huántar ceremonial center (Bennett, 1954). Though the climate made this particular area dangerous, with its high winds and freezing storms, the native people were still able to create masterpieces that have survived the test of time and weather. In this region, there have been found enormous stone figures made of sandstone and basalt. Instead of just sculpting the head, as the Olmec did, the Tiahuanaco people carved entire bodies in the stone. These figures depicted either kneeling or sitting [Figure 6]. The facial structure of these sculptures differs greatly from those of the Olmec, who had rounder heads with flat noses and large lips. The Tiahuanaco statues have “protruding cheek bones, jutting jaws, and flaring lips” (Bennett, 1954, p. 70). While the Mochica example is on a much smaller scale, the body position is still nearly identical to that of the Tiahuanaco stone sculptures. The people that carved these displayed their desire to show realism with their careful attention to detail and incision of these twenty-foot-tall statues by the presence of additional objects (e.g. goblets) and headbands on each one.
The evidence of Tiahuanaco art in Peru differs greatly from that of Bolivia, though both are undoubtedly from the same culture. The Peruvian Tiahuanaco art consists more of ceramics and tapestries rather than large stone sculptures (Bennett, 1954). Although both Peruvian and Bolivian cultures are called Tiahuanaco, they still had clear differences as well as similarities. The main reason one culture, though separated, would have different styles is through the influence of other nearby cultures, in a mild sort of syncretism, since the two Tiahuanaco cultures can still be linked by their styles. Had the influences of outside civilizations on the Tiahuanaco cultures been more dramatic and present, the Peruvian and Bolivian cultures would not share the same name of Tiahuanaco because there would not be substantial evidence that they were at one time from the same society.

Looking even further out, the presence of giant human sculptures across Latin America, including on Rapa Nui, or Easter Island, suggests that the people of Latin America experienced each other’s cultures and experimented with their artistic styles even beyond the continuous continent and ventured further out into the sea. The appearance of such similar figures could not have been the work of one group moving their way through the continent because of the differences in facial features. The Olmec colossal heads have wide nostrils and helmets of some sort whereas the Tiahuanaco stone figures have narrower noses, longer faces, and jutted-out jaws. The land bridge that connected Siberia to present-day Alaska roughly 14,000 years ago brought not only Ice Age animals but also people to this new continent. The people that crossed the bridge brought with them crafts and ideas that probably included the study of solar and lunar cycles, as well as beliefs in spirituality and means of survival (i.e. hunting and gathering techniques) (Scott, 1999).
If that is the case and all the ancient people in the Americas once belonged to the same culture, it would explain why many of their artistic styles and artwork have similarities. The speculation of the past seems to have finally reached an end with the validation that “most of the elements of Mesoamerican art and architecture can be seen to have an Olmec origin” (Miller, 2012, p. 26). Though there are some skeptics, those that want to believe the Maya were their own culture, separate from all others, the evidence is clear that all neighboring civilizations borrowed at least one aspect from the ancient Olmec, whether it be artistic, ritualistic, or any number of aspects. This is the perfect example of continent-wide diffusion that had been taking place for centuries or even millennia, but in a much different manner than what will happen to these native populations once the Spanish arrive.

The Aztec civilization had only just started to become powerful about a century before the Spanish came to the Americas. Before that time, they had been soldiers for surrounding groups until they finally decided to move and create their own society (Miller, 2012). The Aztec civilization did not last nearly as long as the others in Central America but it did last about 100 years longer than the Inca civilization in the Andes. The Aztecs were active from around the 12th century until the Spanish conquered them in the 1520s, specifically 1375-1521 CE (Scott, 1999). They were gaining power and land until the mid-1400s CE when natural disasters caused crop failures. However, when all hope seemed lost, the 52-year cycle restarted, which ceased all the disasters and brought about a time of flourishment for them. In Aztec calendrics, it took 52 years to fully complete the two main calendars, which would then end in a celebration (Miller, 2012). The end of the 52 years also

Figure 7. Female and Male deities. Metropolitan Museum of Art.
brought the end of the bad times for the Aztecs. After the invasion of the Spanish, very few pieces of art made from metal or wood survived. Therefore, of the limited sculpture that lasted, volcanic rock was mainly used, which is reminiscent of the Olmec, as well as gems such as jade. Most of the Aztec sculptures were made to honor deities, creating their likeness in stone (Wolfe, 1976). There were common basic shapes that nearly all sculptures followed: forward-facing, women kneeling with their hands on their knees and men sitting in an upright position with their arms wrapped around their knees (King, 2008) [Figure 7]. The similarity in the position through multiple ancient cultures could indicate a similar way of worshipping the gods across the continent. Even though the majority of sculptures depicted gods and goddesses, there were no facial features, distinguishing between which of the gods were being portrayed, just that it was the male and female ideals.

The main difference between the Aztec and Mochica sculptures is that the Aztec sculpture is just a sculpture, while the Mochica sculpture is in reality a jar that has had the handle broken off. The body positions of the two kneeling figures depicted are almost identical, with the only variations being in the clothing and the facial features. The Mochica woman’s jaw and lips jut out much more than the Aztec woman’s and it seems that the Mochica woman is crouched farther down or leaning forward whereas the Aztec woman is kneeling straight upright.

When these ancient civilizations, such as the Maya or Aztec, conquered other groups, the conquered groups’ art styles were incorporated into the victorious groups’ art styles, though usually for the depiction of the Maya/Aztec victory. With the incorporation of others’ art styles and methods, the oldest forms and techniques from thousands of year prior, could have still be in use because the more powerful groups embraced differences rather than shaming and murdering because of them, as the Spanish did once they met the remaining societies. Miller (2012)
explains the numerous outside societies from which the Aztec people got their inspiration, as well as completed artwork from other cultures. Similar to today’s archaeologists, “the Aztecs were continually uncovering elements of the past” (Miller, 2012, p. 253).

Though the Inca civilization spanned the greatest distance (from present-day Ecuador down into Chile), their rule was the shortest, lasting only from 1427-1532 CE (Scott, 1999). They officially formed in the 1430s and slowly kept expanding, incorporating traditions and languages of the people they conquered. This is reminiscent of how the Aztec civilization functioned in Central America and how the whole of Latin America was participating in syncretism in respects to their religion, art, and language. The Inca religion and culture was more of a mixture of multiple Andean groups, especially the Wari and Tiahuanaco. Though they lived around the same time as the Aztecs, they led very different lives. While the Aztecs were still sacrificing humans to the gods, the Inca had incorporated their people into a political system with organization and city planning. Not all the credit can go to the Inca in their advancement, however, as much of their civilization was based upon others (Bennett, 1954); agriculture had been in the Andes since at least Mochica times and the artistic techniques used by the Inca had been passed down through generations and cultures. Due to the fact that the Inca were so advanced, they rarely bothered to sculpt anything in stone, preferring to work with metals instead. The majority of the stone objects that have been found are club heads, carved llamas, and dinnerware, mainly bowls (Bennett, 1954).

The only painting that survived in Latin America prior to the conquest was done as wall murals, as they had no canvas with which to work or the material has since withered away. These murals rarely showed specific people, but rather historical events or symbolism related to calendrical or religious events (Kelemen, 1969). Not many painters from Europe made the
journey to the New World because of the lack of supplies; the cost of importing canvas and oil would have made any painter poor. Those that did make the journey attempted to use cotton as a substitute. However, cotton does not stretch as well as canvas and the European technique of painting only caused the cotton canvas to sag. For that reason, many of the initial colonial paintings lack flair and exuberance so as to keep the material as light as possible (Kelemen, 1969). In the following examples, wall murals over 2,000 years old have been found in both the Mexico region and in the Andes. According to John Scott (1999), “some paintings most likely were executed…to capture the spirit of the animal to be hunted” (p. 7), and both of these murals accurately depict what he said.

Discovered relatively recently in 2001 in San Bartolo, Guatemala by archaeologist Bill Saturno are walls covered with pristine artwork done by the Maya. They were found through a tunnel that leads into a hidden room that is located in the center of a pyramid/temple that is commonly associated with the oldest Maya royal tomb (“Early Maya Sistine Chapel,” 2011). The most remarkable thing about this discovery is that the murals were dated back to 100 BCE, making them the oldest known Maya art to this day. Before this site was found, archaeologists believed murals found in Bonampak, Mexico, dating to 790 CE, were the oldest Maya art (Saturno, 2012). Based on the age of the art and the materials available, it could have been safe to assume that the techniques would have been more basic, with less detail and color, especially with the exposure to the air that could have dulled the brilliant hues, but that is not the case. These walls still reveal the bright reds and yellows with which they were painted. The attention to detail given to the figures is also more incredible than was thought possible so long ago. Murals often depict multiple scenes, and this one is no exception.
The room has murals painted on the Western and Northern walls. Even though the drawings seem continuous, they show different scenes taking place. On the West wall, there are many more scenes because the length of the wall is two or three times the length of the North wall. These scenes mainly depict the Maya creation story, as understood from the *Popol Vuh* [Figure 8]. The majority of the world has heard about the Maya calendar, but they may not know that the Maya also had a written language system, which is the most important tool used today to understand their history. There are two main texts that have provided insight to the past: *Popol Vuh* and *Chilam Balam* (Gomez, 2015). These books were written by members of a hybrid Quiché-Maya nobility from around the time of the Spanish conquest that details the origins, traditions, and history of these people. Anthropologists believe these correspond with highland Maya (Guatemala) and lowland Maya (Yucatán) respectively. As mentioned previously, the artwork includes animals being hunted. Thus, the mural begins with a sacrifice of a fish, deer, and then turkey, one animal from the sea, the land, and the sky, respectively. The Maya believed the earth was created by the giant *Huracán* (hurricane in English), the wind and sky god. When the plants and animals weren’t enough to satisfy the gods, the humans were created specifically to honor the gods through sacrifice. In this scene, each recreation of the Maize god is stabbing a stick through his genitals, to sacrifice his blood along
with the animal’s blood (Hacking, 2014). This is called a blood-sacrifice and was common among the Maya for religious rituals. The mural shows the same god in different lives at different stages in this creation process until the Maize god is finally crowned. Depending on the sources, the figures are either four kings and the Maize god or five personifications of the Maize god throughout time. Because the Maize god is one of the most important, the final scene on the West wall portrays his life from infancy to coronation.

The two-part scene on the North wall shows an object, decidedly a gourd, exploding with babies and one fully-grown figure. This could be interpreted as a god creating other deities, most likely rain gods. The other half of the scene portrays dressed-up men bringing gifts to the Maize god, with a kneeling woman beside him, also offering gifts [Figure 9].

The murals, is seems, were meant to be “read” starting at the left-most end of the West wall and finished at the right-most end of the North wall. By looking at it that way, the narrative starts with each attempt at creation, until humanity is finally perfect and the Maize god is crowned king. Following up on the North wall leads to the life as a king and a more human creation story in the sense that the king has to prove his divinity.

Along with the discovery of the murals, Maya text appears in the margins ("Early Maya Sistine Chapel", 2011). There is not much evidence of Maya writing until the 300s CE, so seeing this script nearly 400 years before scholars thought Maya writing existed changes the perception many of them had regarding the level of Maya advancement at this period. Prior to finding these
murals, Mayanists only had the Popol Vuh script to use when understanding the Maya mythology and creation stories. Now, they are able to add the visual aspect to these stories to see how the Maya actually envisioned their gods and creation.

In the Andean sphere, a temple was found even more recently in 2007 by Ignacio Alva that dates back even farther than the Maya mural. The Lambayeque Valley where the Ventarrón Temple was found is in northwestern Peru, almost on the coast. This mural is one of the oldest wall paintings found in the Andean region (Wright et al, 2015).

The story told in the mural is not as in depth and rousing as the Maya mural, but it dates back to roughly 2000 BCE (Wright et al, 2015), doubling the age of the Maya mural. The mural, still with vivid color in it, depicts a deer hunt in which the deer are caught in a net [Figure 10]. This is a clear example of what Scott (1999) understood about ancient cultures and their need to paint animals being hunted. The entire mural is crisscrossed to show that it is a net and the three deer caught in it have wide eyes, potentially portraying the fear the animals might have felt. However intriguing and groundbreaking the existence of the mural is, a more interesting finding was found just feet away. Connected to the temple is a separate room for ceremonial purposes. This room was built in the shape of a chakana, which is known as the “Andean cross” (Starrs, 2009). The cross is widely associated with the Inca, but dates back much farther than the 13th century.

Although anthropologists have known the Inca did not spring up out of nowhere with their own unique culture, they did not know how far back certain aspects of Inca culture went. The artistic syncretism has already been touched upon in the previous pages describing the various cultures
and their similarities, but there is far more to look into than just art. The Quechua language was inherited from a conquered group, though it is synonymous with Inca language, and the chakana symbol, on which this temple was based, dates back even further than the Chavín de Huántar period, who lived from 900-200 BCE. Once again, this illustrates the fact that the civilizations living throughout the Americas in the past 3,000 years have all shared their cultures and adopted at least some parts of others into their own identity. The oldest known discovery of a chakana is dated to nearly 5,000 years ago in Caral, near present-day Lima (Starrs, 2009). The styles of the two murals is noticeably different; the Andean mural uses much cooler tones (blues and purples) while the Maya murals are predominately red with a lot of circular detail added (e.g. headdresses, smoke). However, it does show the development of both regions in that they were able to mix natural ingredients to create paint that would last centuries.

Archaeologists could still be finding pieces of the recent past of the Inca, Aztec, and whatever intermixed civilizations would have followed if it weren’t for the invasion of the Spanish. Once the Spanish came to the Americas, the native populations didn’t stand a chance of defending themselves because of the diseases and weaponry the Spanish brought with them. After the native populations across Latin America were forced into submission, Spain controlled nearly all of Latin America. They had to set up a system of governance to keep the natives in check so they decided on a viceroyalty, which was a province ruled by a Spaniard who got his orders from the king. The first one was established in Central America with Mexico City as the capital in 1535 and the second one followed not long after in South America with Peru as the headquarters in 1544 (Kelemen, 1969). Many years later, in 1717, Spain formed a third viceroyalty called New Granada that consisted of present-day Colombia, Venezuela, and Ecuador. The final viceroyalty began in 1776 with Argentina, Bolivia, Paraguay, and Uruguay,
called the Río De La Plata. Under these viceroyalties, the native populations had to pay a tribute to the Spanish king, which wasn’t too different from giving tribute to their gods. Because the main mission of the conquistadores was to bring the true faith to these savage pagans, the church was not at all separate from the state. The Catholic Church took it into their hands to rid this new land of the paganist beliefs through the Inquisition, which strove to defeat heresy. However, many natives were able to avoid the heretical punishment because they were deemed “not of sufficient intelligence and rational enough to be held responsible for his acts” (Kelemen, 1969, p. 170).

There were two degrees of forced labor under Spanish rule: *encomiendas* and the *mita*. In the encomienda system, the Spanish were given *repartamientos*, or tracts of land, and they owned everything that was on the land, including the people (Minster, 2018). In addition to having to pay the Spanish tribute, the native people were also required to work for a certain amount of time, whether it be on a plantation, in a mine, or just as household slaves. In order for the Spanish to see this as good and equally beneficial, the landowners were responsible for converting their native slaves to Christianity (Minster, 2018). Because the Spanish held much more power and influence than the natives, it was easy to take advantage of them and overcharge and overwork them to the point of death. Because of their pagan beliefs, it was also easier for the Spanish to treat them poorly because they were “barely human.” Thankfully, the Spanish king never made the encomienda system permanent and passable to future generations.

Although the encomiendas were horrible, the mita was worse still. The mita was specifically in the Andean region, the most famous one existing in Potosí, Bolivia. During the three-year time frame of the formal mita’s presence (1573-1575), around 35,000 natives were forced to leave their homes and work in the deadly mercury mines (Dell, 2010). However, a
more illegal form of the mita continued well into the 1700s, finally ending in 1812. The only real reason the mita ended was not because Spain came to their senses about their inhumane labor laws and abuses, but because the silver in the mines was completely tapped out (Dell, 2010). The indigenous people were required to give one seventh of the male population to work, and most likely die, in these mines. Being conquered by another, more powerful group of people and being forced to follow their religion and traditions was one thing, but being forced into slavery by them and dying because of their unfair treatment eventually caused the native population to rebel and fight for themselves and their rights. But before they were able to physically fight back, they fought back through the art they were forced to create, by leaving their marks as indigenous people in their artwork.

Since the Spanish were forcing their artistic styles onto the natives, it is interesting to know where their style originated. The Spanish style of art was heavily influenced by the Moors, as they came to the Iberian Peninsula and conquered the land as their own, bringing their religion and traditions with them in the 700s CE. Because of their presence, the Spanish mainly used brick, wood, and tile. Tile was a well-known aspect of Moorish architecture, which then was incorporated into the Spanish art and architecture. The Baroque period occurred soon after the Moors and Flemish had left and the Spanish were finally able to make their own kind of art. Because of that, the “Baroque was not merely an art style, it was a mode of living” (Kelemen, 1969, 172). It was a way of life because they were finally able to express themselves and their culture without the oppression of the Flemish and Moors. In their expedition to the New World, the conquistadores couldn’t fit artists in with themselves and the missionaries on the ship, which is where the natives came in. Before the Spanish thought of using the natives for their individual and specialized talents, they made them do the manual labor to build all the churches and houses,
because such work was below their status as conquerors. The inhumane labor, in addition to the European diseases, killed off many of the ancient civilizations. After just a century of forced labor and European disease, the native numbers dropped from about 50 million down to less than 10 million (Johnson, 2014). It was during this period—the middle of the 16th century—that African slaves started getting shipped into Latin America. Widely unknown to the world is that fact that, in the almost 300 years of slave trade, only about 6% of Africans ended up on the North American East Coast (Johnson, 2014). That means that 94% of all slaves went to the Caribbean and South America. In Bolivia, according to Johnson (2014), the life expectancy of an African slave working the mines was a mere two months.

Since Spain was a Catholic country, they received a shock when they came to the Americas. While they were expecting Westernized civilizations in the Indies, they stumbled upon cultures that were more advanced in some respects, but seemed to be barbaric pagans to the Europeans. The Spanish took it upon themselves to convert and save all the natives they could, whether or not they wanted to be converted. While the Spanish was forcing the Catholic faith on the native populations, they were trying to make connections with their traditional beliefs. This eventually led to religious syncretism, which will be discussed more in depth later. Those who survived past the building and disease were then forced to make paintings for the Spanish. While they had to follow the Spanish model, the natives were able to bring in their own colors, forms and history. As Kelemen states in his book on American arts (1969), “favorite statues, especially at pilgrim centers, were often reproduced in paintings” (p. 272). The recreations of these statues were called statue-paintings, meaning the artist painted a statue and everything that went along with it. For that reason, the paintings generally have curtains or columns in the background (Kelemen, 1969). There are generally two trends seen in colonial art: the effort to imitate the
European models, which ended up being uninspired, and a new expression of art, which was different from both Spanish models and earlier Latin American styles (Kelemen, 1969). It wasn’t until the 17th century that paintings finally outnumbered sculptures, which brought with it the need for more painters into the New World.

As common as it is to have a picture of the queen or president in a room today, there were paintings of the Spanish kings, who had never visited the New World, completed in Latin America. While the natives were doing their duty in painting whatever religious scenes the Spaniards asked of them, they were still able to use some of their own styles. In a painting of the funeral of the Virgin Mary, there is the clear European aspect, the depiction of Mary’s life on the outskirts of the picture with her as the central focus comes from Byzantine tradition (Kelemen, 1969) [Figure 11]. In the top left corner, it appears that Mary, along with some disciples, are carrying the dead body of Jesus Christ. In the top right corner, there are two people standing in the doorway of a church with a procession of people that continues to the center in which the procession is carrying Mary’s body, surrounded by little cherubs. However, the extra use of plants and animals in the landscape is commonly found in precolonial art. The use of native flora and fauna was not necessarily syncretism, but rather the lack of knowledge about the native European flora and fauna and so the painters added what they already knew. Two people appear in the bottom left corner, not quite as part of the scene, almost as if they are looking on from a distance. These men are dressed in colonial style, meaning to bring the scene of the Virgin
Mary’s funeral closer to present day. The audience can now join in with the colonialists in celebrating her life and death in a personal manner. Many ancient people, specifically the ones mentioned in this paper, believed that everything was living and had ancient spirits within them, creating myths and legends about how certain spirits became enclosed in such objects as well as how the world was created through natural forces and deities. In that way, both Spanish and native cultures were able to understand the celebration of life and the belief in an afterlife to connect with each other’s faiths.

It wasn’t until their independence in the late 18th century that the indigenous peoples were finally able to paint themselves rather than priests who had taught them the new faith, kings they would never meet, or portraits of the people who conquered them. Fortunately, there was a

Spanish botanist named José Celestino Mutis who commissioned an Ecuadorian painter, Vicente Albán, to illustrate his Ecuadorian homeland (Kelemen, 19169). Only six or seven of these landscapes survive today. The two paintings shown to the left are part of a set that show the differences between the classes during colonialism in Ecuador. They were completed in the late 18th century or very beginning of the 19th century. The first painting shows a native woman selling fruit, which is still common in Latin America today [Figure 12]. In her right hand, she is holding a bag. Centuries ago, and even some more rural parts today, it was common for everyone to carry a bag of coca leaves with them and, when greeting someone, to exchange leaves. While she is dressed well, her bare feet indicate her poor status as well as a reference to the natives’ ancestors. She is shown next to a
basket of produce, most likely selling the fruit for money, with a description of each labeled item. With the addition of the fruit, the native produce and crops are shown to the world, as well as how native women, most likely living in rural areas, are normally dressed.

Based on the backgrounds and colors used, it is clear to see that the previous painting and the painting to the left are part of a set. In the second painting, a Spanish woman is shopping for fruit with her black slave [Figure 13]. She is shown as wearing extravagant clothing, though some of the finer detail has faded over time, and is wearing a cross necklace, so the world knows she is Catholic, and therefore more civilized than the indigenous population (Katzew, 2015). This painting also depicts the fruit that was native to the area, nearly the exact same fruit as the native woman was selling in the first painting of the set. Even though he was commissioned to paint his native homeland, Vincente Albán used this opportunity to show what life was like for everyone living in Ecuador at the time, with the natives, nobles, and slaves all having different experiences. With only using paints, he is able to tell the world so much about various aspects of life, including the experiences, but also the available food, the normal clothing for different classes, and the native flora and general environment. These two paintings now reside in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Of the remaining four or five, four are owned by a private collector and not much is known about the last work, or even if it exists in the first place.

In the book Painting a New World, Donna Pierce et al (2004) reference a painting completed in Mexico around the same time as the previous two paintings. In 1775, Francisco
Clapera, told the story of the consequences of the Spanish invasion: a European man, native woman, and a mixed, or mestiza, daughter [Figure 14]. Although the characters are different, the overall painting is quite similar to those of the Ecuadorian women. All the women are near food, one is selling it and two are buying it. An interesting feature of the Mexican family is the fact that the daughter seems to be clinging and interacting with the father, who seems uninterested in her. The mother and daughter are in similar clothing, though it seems plainer than older native clothes. Since the daughter is of mixed blood, the Spaniard could easily have been teaching her to reject her native roots and focus only on the Spanish heritage so she will gain more respect when she’s older. Based on the stance of the Spaniard, it almost appears like the woman is a slave, or has similar status to a slave, because his hand is on her shoulder, keeping her in line. During this time, it was incredibly common to find artwork that depicted the interbreeding of the three main races, Spanish, African, and native (Pierce, 2015). Clapera was a native of Spain, and came to Mexico City to be an assistant director of painting at an academy (Pierce et all, 2004). There are very few paintings today that have been done by Clapera, the one mentioned above currently residing in the Denver Art Museum.

Even after the natives were commissioned to craft Christian pieces of art, they still slipped in their own beliefs and styles. In Christian-era paintings in Latin America, the more nature that is present, the more the artist was referring to his or her traditional faith of animism and all things having life and a spirit inside them. In many cases, the use of nature was the most basic form of syncretism. The two paintings already mentioned don’t necessarily fall into the
Artistic Syncretism…

Timm 30

syncretic category, because they are merely telling a story about the time period, but they are mentioned here because they portray a combination of native and European styles. Especially during this tumultuous time, the natives that were painting their homeland—so that Europeans could see it—wanted to show what was happening in addition to the scenery. The next section talks more in depth about the various ways in which the natives were able to portray their traditional beliefs while trying to obey the new Catholic faith.

As was briefly mentioned above, during the colonial period, there was a lot of religious syncretism, which is the combination of two or more religions into a single, new belief system. Syncretism is different than the blending of two ideas or styles, as was present in Figure 11, which incorporated the European style with indigenous undertones. That is generally called mestizaje, which is the blending of the Old and New World imagery specifically (Kelemen, 1969). One reason syncretism occurred was because many of the native populations continued practicing their own faith under the pretense of practicing Catholicism (De La Torre, 2016). As will be explained more thoroughly later, the natives did not completely adopt the Catholic faith, but rather reimagined various aspects, especially the Virgin Mary, as prominent figures in their own religions. Though colonialism was everywhere in Latin America, its effects on the artistic style were much fewer in the Mexican region than in the further south. The majority of painting from the time following the conquest are portraits of elite Spanish men and women. The few pieces that depict native people don’t have much syncretism to find. The following examples are mainly Andean depictions of syncretism and touch on the potential displays of minor syncretism in Mexico-area painting, since those are much rarer. The majority of the syncretic artwork done during and after colonialism depict the Virgin Mary. Because of the native populations’ beliefs in the power of nature and especially the belief in Mother Nature, the Virgin Mary, the most
prominent female figure in Catholicism, it was easier to make a connection between the two most important women in each faith.

During the influx of Catholicism in Latin America, the natives painted pictures of the Virgin Mary more than anything else. Because these images were being sent all over the world, the artists used them as ways to share their own beliefs as well. In trying to make connections between the native religions and Catholicism, the indigenous people of the Andes found a way to equate Mary to Pachamama (Mother Earth) as well as to the Inca moon goddess, who was also the Inca queen (Damian, 1995). Of course, there is going to be variation in the style in which Mary was painted based on each of the artist’s techniques. However, the one constant between them all lies in her shape. Mary’s dress always has a rounded, bell shape, which is the natives referring back to the shape of their most sacred mountain—Pachamama. The Spanish did not have much of a problem with this portrayal because it was the easiest way for the natives to think about and understand the Catholic faith. Even in Mary’s different roles and personas, whether it be as Virgin of the Rosary or in the Immaculate Conception, she is always elaborately clothed in a mountain-shaped dress. In depicting Mary this way, the natives were able to still praise “her,” though she was really the embodiment of their own Mother Earth. As Carol Damian (1995) says, “Cuzco representations of the Virgin of the Candlestick describe Mary in the wide bell-shaped dress suggesting the shape of the mountain worshipped as Pachamama” (p.51).

A prime example of such religious syncretism is the Peruvian painting of the Virgin of the Candlestick, La Candelaria [Figure 15]. This version of Mary is to celebrate Candlemas on
February 2nd, which is the Feast of the Purification, or the presentation in the temple of baby Jesus (Kelemen, 1969). The image clearly shows Mary’s face and her signature crown of heaven, but the lace that surrounds her head and her dress give her a much larger bodily shape, specifically the shape of a mountain. The presence of all the candles is characteristic of Mary in general, but especially Mary as the Virgin of the Candlestick in the celebration of Candlemas. An important feature that is present in many paintings of Mary is that she is standing on a crescent moon. Adding a moon into a picture, especially in the Andes, points toward the influence and importance of the Inca moon goddess in the integration of the two faiths. Though the artist is unknown, the image was done at the end of the seventeenth century or the beginning of the eighteenth. It is rare to have a painting from this time period and specific region to be so well preserved and without much fading (Kelemen, 1969).

An example of syncretism that doesn’t come from the Andes was painted in 1777 in the Mexico region (Pierce et al, 2004). While looking at art from the Andes and knowing about their religious connection to Pachamama and how that is incorporated into their recreations of Mary, that doesn’t explain how a similar form was painted where the same gods were not worshipped. With that being said, it seems probable that the natives living in this region had similar beliefs in that mountains and nature were the basis for their gods and how life functioned around them was influenced by these natural forces. However, the example described here is not the Virgin Mary, but rather Sister Maria Ignacia [Figure 16]. Painted at the Academia de San Carlos by José de Alcibar, the painting shows the high status of a lighter-colored woman
at the time (Pierce et al, 2004). Similar to the painting of the noble woman, Sister Maria Ignacia has crucifixes, though with her being a “sister” or nun, it makes more sense than it did with the noble woman to carry such religious items. While Sister Maria is draped in a detailed cape, it is clear to see that her body shape is not one of a normal woman. It could be just coincidence, but the rounded-triangle shape she takes on is more reminiscent of the syncretic painting of Mary done in the Andes, though it is not quite as obvious. Because Mary was the relevant and easily-adopted female figure in Catholicism, it makes less sense as to why the natives would have painted another woman in the same fashion. Perhaps, then, it could be safe to assume that the natives equated nearly all Catholic female figures to Mother Nature and their sacred mountainous landforms. However, both of these paintings depict a rounded woman still pass as her wearing normal clothes and following the rules put in place by the Spanish. The following painting does just the opposite. Damian (1995) points out the consistency in the artwork created by the Andean people in saying:

“The Virgin Mary dressed in a triangular gown replicates the mountains of the Andes and symbolizes the Earth Mother for the Andean people. By combining the triangular gown with birds, flowers, and other attributes, the Andean artist identifies Mary with the bounties of the land and the sacred landscape” (p. 63).

Before beginning the topic of syncretism, the painting section was introduced with a focus on how the use of native flora and fauna was the simplest manner in which the native populations were able to add their own traditions into their commissioned work. Even more important, though, is the syncretism that is revealed by the shape of her gown. For that reason, many of the paintings in this paper depict Mary in a bell-shaped dress. However, the next painting, though still painted by a Cusco artist, portrays the Virgin Mary in quite a different way.
It was just as easy to relate Mary to the Inca moon goddess Mama Quilla because of the many descriptions of Mary having a higher status than everyone else, since she was queen of heaven. Because many of the Spanish renditions of the Virgin Mary included her rising above the mortal world during her assumption into heaven, it was easier for the indigenous artists to appropriate Mary to become a Christian/Andean moon deity (Damian, 1995). The Immaculate Conception was used by the native Cusco artists as a way to pay their respects to the moon goddess, Mama Quilla, as well as to noble women (Damian, 1995). In these images of Mary, she is no longer shaped like a mountain, but rather wearing a normal-shaped dress. The giveaway of her being used as the moon goddess is in her feet; she is often depicted standing on a crescent moon [Figure 17]. This figure was painted around 1675 by a famous native painter by the name of Diego Quispe Tito in Cusco. His name directly implies his Inca heritage, as there are Inca homes with the names of both Quispe and Tito.

He depicts Mary standing on the crescent moon, which is usually associated with the Immaculate Conception. The presence of the crescent moon exists in European depictions of Mary as well. Therefore, the use of the crescent moon in native art is most likely a combination of European influence as well as the desire to relate Mary back to the moon goddess (Kelemen, 1969). Other important aspects of the painting include the regular people beneath her, as she is more important than everyone else, and twelve stars surrounding her head, as was mentioned in the book of Revelations in the Bible (Damian, 1995). Not only found in this painting but in many others of the Virgin Mary as well are flowers, specifically lilies and thorn-less roses. Lilies are
often associated with purity, with Mary being one of the purest people to ever live. Roses, according to the Bible, were originally made without thorns but, after the Original Sin, were added as a punishment for disobeying God (Damian, 1995).

In reference to the crescent moon beneath Mary’s feet in numerous paintings, while it can generally symbolize the Inca moon goddess, it can also be a reference to a ceremonial knife, called a *tumi*, used by the Inca and pre-Inca societies (Damian, 1995). This specific knife is an object of victory and conquest for warriors. In that sense, to combine both ideas, the “tumi relates to the crescent moon and to Mary as the victorious Queen of Heaven and queen of the Andes” (Damian, 1995, p. 71).

Religious syncretism did not just happen in South America, though there are more examples that survived from that region. Often, the Spaniards would destroy or burn native art, potentially even their own commissioned art if they believed it to have too many native undertones. One example that has survived though time combines Asian and Spanish techniques as well as native concepts (Katzew, 2010). A painting by Miguel González, completed right before the beginning of the 17th century, shows the Virgin Mary on painted Mother of Pearl in a mosaic style in her role as the Virgin of Guadalupe [Figure 18]. However, much like in Figure 17, she is standing on a crescent moon, though likely not to symbolize the Inca moon goddess or Andean knife, since it is a Mexican painting. The Moon goddess is relevant and important in nearly every religion, so it makes sense that most syncretic art depicts Mary and the natives’ most important woman in their native religion as...
interchangeable and equal. Each corner piece shows a different part of the story of the Virgin of Guadalupe, where she a) visits Juan Diego on the hill, b) imprints her image onto his *tilma*, or tunic, hidden by the flowers he was carrying in his tilma c) he is guided by angels to the church, and then d) he shows the tilma to religious officials. The clothing and style of Mary and Juan Diego are reminiscent of native styles, but the clothing of the supposed Spaniards to whom he is showing his tunic as well as the large ship indicate this was made after the Spanish conquest (Katzew, 2010). The winged angels also imply the adoption of Catholicism with the mixing of styles and ideas of the native population. This work combines numerous artistic styles and techniques. Other than the story behind the painting and some of the clothing, Miguel González mainly used European or Asian styles and techniques to convey his message.

After seeing and understanding the distinct pagan undertones in the colonial art, it would seem as though the Spanish had to have noticed them. While much did go unnoticed, an archbishop ordered the removal of specific Andean components on a few statues (Damian, 1995). There isn’t any mention of artists having to paint over hidden Inca beliefs, but it seems more likely that these additions were noticed. Those who noticed either did not care or made peace with the idea that the natives could worship their traditional gods as long as they were also worshipping the Catholic one.
A much more famous—among the native populations—and more obvious display of religious syncretism is shown in the Virgin of Potosí [Figure 19]. Leonardo Castedo (1969), in his book on the history of Latin American art, includes this picture, in which the Virgin Mary is made to represent the Potosí Mountain in Bolivia, which was sacred to the people in that region, including the Inca, as a depiction of the melding of two religions. He makes no effort to explain the syncretism but merely states, “…more marked primitivism, the rigidity of the figures, and the abundance of ‘narrative pictures’” (p. 179).

In this image, it no longer looks as though Mary is wearing a large, bell-shaped dress. Now, she is simply coming out of the mountain; her hands are not connected to any sleeves nor is her head coming out of a collar. In talking about the various depictions of Mary, Damian (1995) states:

“The image of the Virgin as the mountain is evident in those works which actually describe her as or in the mountain. One of the best known paintings comes from Alto Peru. In The Virgin Mary of the Mountain of Potosí, one of several works with Mary described within a mountain painted in the eighteenth century, the face and hands of the Virgin are actually within the conical shape of the mountain of Potosí” (p. 53).

Nearly every other aspect of the painting indicates this as the crowning of Mary, with the Holy Trinity above her placing the crown. Just below their feet, however, are the Inca symbols for the sun and moon. Below God the Father is the moon, which is crescent-shaped and has a face looking toward Mary. The sun also has a face looking at Mary, with numerous rays waving
Artistic Syncretism…

around it. At the bottom of the image is the king of Spain and the Pope, as well as other religious figures (Damian, 1995). Within the mountain that is Mary, the native people are happily living their normal, uninterrupted lives, though this was painted after many years of Spanish rule, in the eighteenth century (Damian, 1995). The addition of the native people living in peace could be the painter’s desire to go back to before the Spanish arrived and changed the lives of everyone in the Americas.

Damian (1995) explains that the reason behind the Virgin Mary being the most painted aspect of syncretism is because she was the “most effective means for the indigenous people to disseminate their ancient beliefs” (p. 50). She is the combination of all the female deities relevant to the Inca, namely Pachamama and Mama Quilla. All of the examples of artistic syncretism mentioned so far have all depicted the Virgin Mary, as she was the easiest connection between the Catholic faith and the native beliefs. Though there are not many paintings that depict any other person or scene, there is one example that was painted during the colonial period that is a syncretic adaptation of the Last Supper. Marcos Zapata was a painter from Cusco active in the mid-1700s, during the most syncretic time of colonialism (Zendt, 2010). Along with the Virgin Mary, the Last Supper is considered one of the most well-known images in Catholicism. Because Jesus and his apostles aren’t as easily relatable to native religions, there aren’t nearly as many depictions of Jesus and what he did and taught during his life. The original Last Supper, painted by Leonardo Da Vinci around 1520, depicts the same overall concept, but with everyone on one
side of the table and the group eating bread and wine. Two hundred years later, Marcos Zapata decided to put his own native spin to the scene: he added the native cuisine of guinea pig [Figure 20]. Zapata’s *Last Supper* uses much more red in the outfits and background than the original did, as red was common in Latin America, especially the Cusco area. In contrast to Da Vinci’s *Last Supper*, Zapata’s features the guinea pig, or *cuy*, as the central point, on a golden platter ready to be eaten. Around the table, local produce is seen in the form of fruit, corn, and *chicha*, beer made from corn (Palmer, 2008). In this way, Zapata is letting the world see what Jesus’s last supper would have been like had it taken place in Cusco rather than the Middle East. In reimagining this famous scene with native foods, Zapata created a great work of syncretic art that incorporates two very important aspects to both native and Spanish cultures. Guinea pig was generally eaten on special occasions, similar to lamb that might be eaten in Europe for special feasts. Zapata painted the indigenous equivalent to the European scene by replacing the normal bread and wine with chicha, corn and potatoes, and guinea pig. An interesting twist, other than the cuisine, is the figure staring directly at the audience. That character is Judas, who betrays Jesus to be arrested and crucified. It is clear this man is Judas because of the money bag he is holding, referencing the 30 pieces of silver he received for betraying Jesus. Various people have noticed the resemblance of Judas to Francisco Pizarro, the man responsible for the fall of the Inca Empire (Palmer, 2008). Not only did Zapata use as much native aspects as he could in this Catholic scene, he also wanted to depict the leading conquistador as the perpetrator of the worst betrayal in the Bible as a show of his own frustrations and dislike of the Spanish that destroyed his homeland and the way of living of his ancestors.
Conclusion

The history of the people in Latin America is rich and complex, making it even more disappointing that the Spaniards burned so much of their culture until they were forced to hide their beliefs within this new religion that was forced upon them. The Spanish treatment of the native populations they conquered and the manual labor they were put through was likely a good incentive for them to fight back in a secretive enough way that they wouldn’t be caught—and killed. While the precolonial times show a wide variety of artistic styles and techniques specific to each civilization, the commonalities between the different civilizations and regions indicates clear diffusion of the ideas and beliefs. Later on, after the Spanish invasion, the indigenous people had to paint what the Spaniards wanted, though they were still able to paint their old traditions in as well, as was clear in the syncretic examples. The religious syncretism that took place in Latin America has continued into today where the majority of the population is Catholic but still have religious beliefs that relate back to the old religions and ways of life, including depicting religious figures in native dress rather than the robes generally seen in famous portraits. The loss of lives and of culture was a horrible aspect of Latin American history, but it brought about an entirely new religious ideology and artistic style to the world. With the influx of scholars from around Europe to Latin America in more recent times, differing styles of art and architecture were introduced, almost like a second wave of the conquest, though there were no executions of the natives this time. Future research could easily delve into the adoption and syncretism found within the past few centuries, especially now with the internet allowing for the exchange of knowledge, ideas, and cultures to be spread further and more rapidly.
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