


## Article

# Visual Communication and Evangelizing Art in the Temple of San Francisco of La Paz (Bolivia)

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**Abstract:** The temple of San Francisco de La Paz is one of the best examples of the mestizo baroque style in Bolivia. The richness of the interior of the temple contributes to creating a theatrical and symbolic space, intending to evangelize and transmit the new values of the Catholic faith, through its iconographic programme. Our analysis highlights the differentiation of interior space using altarpiece programmes, thus evidencing how interior architecture is used for communication purposes. We conclude that interior space is transformed for evangelizing purposes.

**Keywords:** San Francisco de La Paz; mestizo baroque; symbolic space; altarpiece discourse

## 1. Introduction

When the Franciscans arrived at La Paz, they built a chapel dedicated to San Pedro and Santiago. The chapel was founded by Fr. Francisco de los Ángeles Morales and his companion Br. Francisco de la Cruz Alcocer—probably in 1549 ([Privaser 1919](#)), which makes it the first religious establishment in this city. Currently, the church is in Plaza San Francisco, the historic centre, one of the busiest, oldest, and most tourist squares of La Paz (Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Temple and Plaza de San Francisco. Photography: Josefina Matas 2023.



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Plaza San Francisco is surrounded by historic buildings and is considered an important cultural and architectural landmark. The church itself is the most significant building in the square, with its spectacular baroque façade and a solemn bell tower.

San Francisco of La Paz is one of the most important temples in Bolivia, as well as one of the best examples of the mestizo baroque in Latin America. However, the value of this building and the research carried out so far suggest that further inquiries on the impact of this heritage on evangelization should be undertaken, particularly from the perspective of visual communication, a discipline still in an early stage nowadays.

This article is noteworthy because, although there is abundant bibliography referring to Franciscan spirituality, in Bolivia, there is no existing bibliography regarding the architecture of this Order—and even less regarding architecture and visual communication. We, therefore, highlight the importance of this article, as its content is completely new, especially concerning the vision from visual communication.

Franciscan religious buildings in Charcas were not faithful copies of European architecture, nor the repetition of a model already solved. The ideas Franciscans brought from their places of origin were transformed and adjusted to new requirements, which generated different architectonic types (whose expression ended up being more American than European). This research is motivated by the questions raised by the previous observations, and it addresses issues more closely linked to semiotics.

The main objective of this paper is to explore the interior architecture of the temple: its main altarpieces, pulpits, and thrones, which communicate in their iconography the Catholic faith's values. The subsequent analysis examines how interior space is differentiated by the content and discourse of the altarpieces and highlights the role of interior architecture in communicating evangelical messages.

The article is divided into three parts. The first part recounts the arrival of the Franciscan Order to Charcas. The second one discusses the definition of the mestizo baroque style. The third part addresses the history of the construction and the description of the interior of the temple. The article finishes with a discussion.

## 2. Materials and Methods

This research was carried out in the framework of a qualitative and exploratory methodology. Primary sources were consulted, such as the chronicles of Diego de Mendoza (1664) and those of Diego de Córdova Salinas (1651). An exhaustive examination of documents at the Franciscan Archive of La Paz and secondary sources was also carried out.<sup>1</sup>

This material and the secondary sources consulted in several libraries—both in Spain and Bolivia—constitute the documentary corpus of this work. The libraries consulted are listed below:

- Biblioteca de la Nación, Spain;
- Biblioteca de la Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Spain;
- Biblioteca de la Agencia Española de Cooperación Internacional para el Desarrollo, Madrid, Spain;
- Private Library of Teresa Gisbert de Mesa, Bolivia;
- Library of the Franciscan Fathers of La Paz, Bolivia;
- Biblioteca de la Universidad Católica “San Pablo”, Bolivia.

## 3. The Franciscans in Charcas

The expansion of the Franciscan Order in its evangelizing endeavour begins in America in 1500 (Abad Pérez 1992). Bartolomé de las Casas states: “The Order of St. Francis came here to populate with the purpose ( . . . ) the five that arrived in 1500 were joined by the seventeen brought by Governor Ovando in 1502; thirteen were priests” (Anasagasti 1992, p. 22).

Between 1505 and 1524, a hundred friars arrived with the intention of founding convents from where to evangelize. The first constructions built were extremely poor. Diego de Mendoza does not explain what those convents were like in their physical

materiality; it is assumed that they were very simple, made of wood, and designed to receive a limited number of people. About the foundation on the mainland, the chronicler writes: “The following year of 1518, the fourteen Franciscans, who came from Burgundy, with others from Santo Domingo, left Hispaniola Island to found convents of both orders on the *Tierra Firme*” (Anasagasti 1992, p. 8).

Once the Antilles were catechized, the Catholic faith was established in Mexico and the gospel was preached in Central America; it was South America’s turn (Morales 1993). The first Franciscan to arrive at High Perú, in 1532, was Fray Marcos de Niza. According to the Most Reverend Archbishop of Mantua, he was “a religious of fervent zeal for the health of the souls and in whom virtue and doctrine shone and were twinned into one, he was a native of the city of Nice, an instructed, observant and religious man” (Mendoza [1664] 1976, p. 10). The chronicler Diego de Córdova y Salinas recounts:<sup>2</sup>

*And then came from East to West twelve Franciscan friars, poor, naked, from the Province of Spain, priests and laymen from Puerto Viejo and Paita, where they landed and ran through the land on foot, preaching Christ Crucified to the city of Cuzco. They carried on like very illustrious men glowing with religiousness and sanctity ( . . . ) and they fertilized the earth with their spirit and poverty in such a way that they began to call them the Twelve Apostles of St. Francis, giving that title and renown to this Province afterwards. Finally, these humble religious men, few and dead to the world, accomplished great things, gaining countless souls for God, albeit with great sweat and work. (Córdova Salinas [1651] 1957, p. 79)*

The first Franciscan to arrive in Charcas<sup>3</sup> was Father Francisco de Aroca, who settled in a modest house in 1539 (Mesa and Gisbert 1985). In the following years, the Franciscans founded the Convent of Saint Anthony in Potosí (1547), Our Lady of the Angels in La Paz (1549), Saint Francis Convent in Cochabamba (1580), and Our Lady of the Angels of Mizque (1600). In 1600, Father Francisco Morales requested the foundation of Saint Anne of Chuquisaca, and then inaugurated Our Lady of Guadalupe of Ururu, and Saint Francis of Tarija six years afterwards. This vertiginous growth of the Order in Bolivian territory will bring about the creation of the Province of Saint Anthony of Charcas in 1565, which will have a series of ups and downs until its definite establishment into the General Chapter of Lima in 1637. Originally, in 1565, the Franciscan Province of Saint Anthony of Charcas covered the territory of the Real Audiencia de Charcas—or La Plata—at that time. Soon after, Cuzco ceased to be part of the Audiencia of Charcas and passed to that of Lima, but the Province of Saint Anthony kept the Convent Máximo del Cuzco as the seat of its Provincial Ministry (San Cristóbal 2004; Espinoza Spinola 1999).

According to Córdova and Salinas, the division was conducted in the following manner:

*( . . . ) the Custody of the New Kingdom of Granada should become a Province and it should be named the Santa Fe del New Kingdom of Granada. The Custody of San Pablo of Quito should become a province and the Province of San Francisco of Quito should be instituted in Peru. The Custody of the Holy Trinity of Chile should become a province and should be named the Province of the Holy Trinity of Chile. The City of the Kings, where there is a Royal Audience, with the entire district of the Audiencia will be the province of the Twelve Apostles and in it, the adjoining name will be kept, as she is the mother of all those Provinces. The City of Argentina, where there is also a Royal Audience, with the entire district of the Audiencia, up to and including the city of Arequipa, should become the Province of Saint Anthony of Charcas. The Kingdom of Tierra Firme, together with the city of Cartagena and Tolú will be (under) the sudden custody of the Province of the Twelve Apostles. (Córdova Salinas [1651] 1957, p. 79)*

#### 4. The Mestizo Baroque Style

From 1690 on, certain original traits, unlike European models, manifested in baroque architecture in Charcas. Some historians call this style “mestizo baroque” or “Andean baroque” (Angulo Iñíguez et al. 1945; Buschiazzo 1961). Its dates range between 1690

and 1780, and it is found in the strip of land between Arequipa (Peru) and Lake Titicaca (Bolivia). The altitude of this strip exceeds 3600 m above sea level. Most of its population is Aymara (Gisbert and Mesa 2012).

The distinguishing features of the mestizo baroque style are the peculiar decoration of European structural forms, with a total disregard for the blueprint (and style) of the building, the use of archaic and flat forms, and the *horror vacui* (Gisbert and Mesa 1997).

The decoration is varied. Its motifs may be grouped into the following themes: American tropical flora and fauna, themes of mannerist origin such as mermaids, masks and grotesques, pre-Columbian and tropical motifs such as monkeys and pumas, and elements of the preRenaissance Christian tradition. It is mostly symbolic architecture (Gisbert and Mesa 2012).

## 5. Our Lady of the Angels Temple in the City of La Paz

### 5.1. Construction History

From August 1549, the date of the last foundation of the Convent of San Francisco in Cuzco, until 1607, the Convent of Our Lady of La Paz belonged to the Province of the XII Apostles of Peru. On the latter date, the Convent of La Paz became part of the Province of Saint Anthony of Charcas, which included what today is the Plurinational State of Bolivia and the departments of Arequipa, Puno, and Cuzco, and all the doctrines and convents under their custody (Cajías de la Vega 2009; Cuadrado Sánchez 1991; García Ros 2000).

According to chronicler Diego de Mendoza, the Convent of Saint Francis in the city of La Paz was founded with the name of "Our Lady of the Angels" by Friar Francisco de los Ángeles Morales, one of the first twelve friars in the territory. Chronicler Diego de Mendoza textually points out that:

*(he) founded it the year of one thousand and five hundred and forty-nine, and it was the first religious convent, which was founded there in the same year, in the same city of La Paz, [it] has ordinarily from fifteen to sixteen religious priests and laymen, two priests for the Indians, one for the Doctrine of Saint Peter that is outside the city, and another in the convent, which the Yanacona Indians of the Convent administrate, by special decrees of Don Francisco de Toledo, and other viceroys; it is an annexe of Saint Peter. (Mendoza [1664] 1976, p. 48)*

The first stone of the construction of the convent was laid on 2 August 1549, the feast of the Portiuncula of Our Lady of the Angels, and, according to chronicler Diego de Mendoza, in 1556, the construction of the temple and the main altarpiece started with enthusiasm—and, at the same time, with calm. The main altarpiece was made by the master Francisco Jiménez Vargas who, in 1582, with Francisco Tito Yupanqui, gilded the image of Our Lady of the Candle. This altarpiece is currently in the church of Ancoraimes in the Department of La Paz. Regarding the temple, the aforementioned chronicler reports:

*the site is the healthiest in the city, on the banks of the river, with a beautiful bridge of lime and stone, which the Convent built for the passage and communication into town, as it is removed from the sun. Its fabrication is plain, without art, comfortably poor for the religious dwelling of its inhabitants, with two uncovered cloisters with only one room, for protection from water. The church is plain, in the ancient fashion (the description is from 1665 and it refers to the classical Greek-Roman style), with a carved wooden roof and two collateral chapels, the choir by the convent does not have more than two ascending steps and is high on the side of the church, as it falls into a precipice, like the other buildings of the town. The masonry is all cedar wood moderately carved. (Mendoza [1664] 1976, p. 575)*

This construction was not very solid and collapsed, due to heavy snowfall, in 1612. Immediately, Don Diego de Portugal, who was Corregidor of La Paz and Tertiary Brother (*Hermano Terciario*), began its reconstruction. Such was the commitment of this devotee, that one day, while he was working, he was told by the friars to go rest at his house, to which Don Diego replied, according to the Chronicles of Diego de Mendoza: "I will



not admit God to be without a home, while I am resting in mine; first the house of God must be finished" (Mendoza [1664] 1976, p. 575). This second temple remained standing until multiple factors—like population growth, changes in the stylistic fashion of the time, evangelizing needs, and the desire of the friars to offer God the best they could—demanded the construction of a new and monumental building, which is the one standing nowadays (Romero 1976).

Undoubtedly, the growth of the city and of its pastoral needs required building a new temple, the third one. The beginning of its work dates from 1743 or 1744, when Fray Alejo Bolaños was the Guardian of the Convent, "... following the donation of BOP 600,000 from the miner Don Diego Baena y Antipara" (Buschiazzo 1949, p. 65). Other donations were added until the sum of BOP 1,200,000 was reached, which is what it cost. The temple was completed in 1772, and its tower in 1889 (Buschiazzo 1949).

From the dates on the dome and in the keys of the vault, it is possible to determine that the dome of the transept was completed in 1753, and the vaults of the naves in 1772.

Written on the dome is: "Se aca/vo es/ta me/dia/nara/nja/año de/1753", which reads as "this half dome was finished in the year 1753". In the vault above the choir, it says: "Se cero est/a Yglecia sie/ndo Gn E. R. P. F./Xtobal de Ri/bas Lr. Jo. A 27 de o/ctubre Año de 1772", which means "this church was closed when Gn. E.R.P.F. Xtobal de Ribas Lr. Jo. on 27 October 1772" (Figure 2).



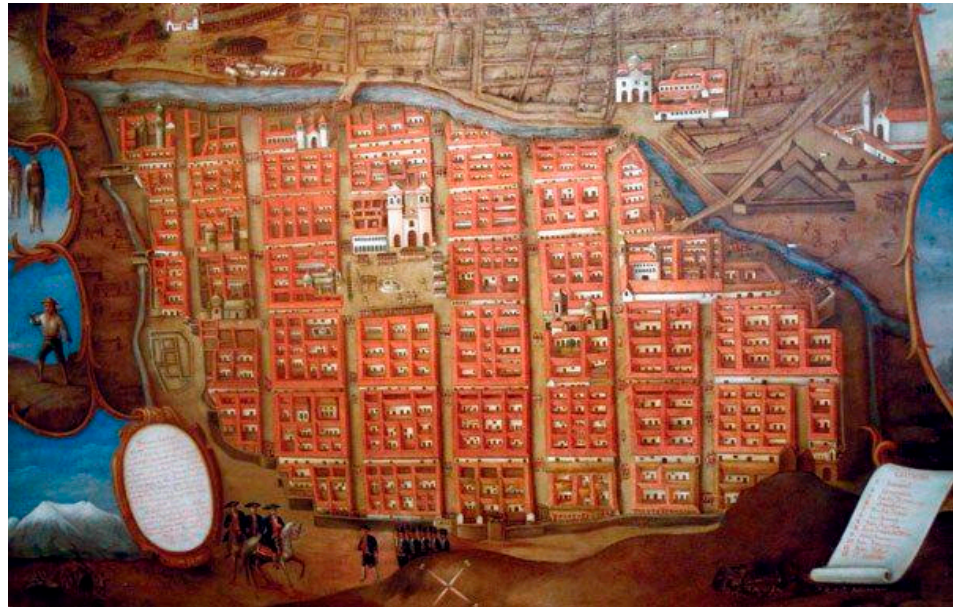
**Figure 2.** Inscription on the choir. Photography: Josefina Matas, 2022.

In 1781, indigenous commander Tupac Katari (Julian Apaza) and his troops led a siege to the city of La Paz; the building was set on fire and both the temple and the convent were looted (Figure 3).

Three years after the siege, the Bishop of La Paz Monsignor Gregorio Francisco Campos consecrated the building. In a painting of the sacristy, there is a testimony of this event:

*A true portrait of the II H.D.D. Gregorio Francisco de Campos, the most dignified Bishop of La Paz and special benefactor of the Seraphic Religion, to whose devotion is due to the conclusion of this Church, which was consecrated on 23 April 1784. (Rossi 2003, p. 30)*

The “very anti-aesthetic” tower (Figure 4), according to Buschiazzo, was the work of Brother Eulalio Morales. Its construction was possible with the donation of BOB 60,000 from Mr and Mrs Penny. Mario Buschiazzo (1949) dates 1885 as the completion of the tower. It should be noted that the latest documents found in the Franciscan Archive of La Paz are from 1898.



**Figure 3.** Painting by Florentino Olivares in the Museo Casa Murillo, showing the siege of La Paz by Tupac Katari in 1781.



**Figure 4.** View of the tower. Photography: Josefina Matas, 2023.

In the history of the temple, an event worth mentioning is its declaration as Major Basilica, granted by Pope Pius XII and celebrated, with all solemnity, on 3 August 1952. On 4 October 1959, in the liturgical feast of St. Francis of Assisi, Bishop Thomas Manning of Coroico blessed the foundation stone of the convent’s new façade (Figure 5).





**Figure 5.** View of the façade of San Francisco. Photography: Josefina Matas, 2023.

Some structural work was carried out in the Basilica and the convent in the 1980s, with the intention of turning them into a museum and an art gallery. The main altarpiece was cleaned, as well as the pulpit, the canvases, the medallions of the central nave, and the original building of the convent was rehabilitated. However, the largest and most appropriate intervention was undertaken between 1993 and 2005. The restoration and re-functionalization project was then completed, and the buildings look since then as they do today (Matas 2017, p. 185).

### 5.2. Temple

The temple is 58 m long, 26 m wide, and the width of the walls ranges from 2 to 3 m. It is of the basilica type, with three naves, a semicircular vault in the transept and a rectangular presbytery. The central nave is covered with a barrel vault, reinforced by transverse arches (*fajones*), and the lateral ones are reinforced by elliptical domes.

The construction entirely made of carved stone gives the effect of one being in a hieratic and sacred space, perhaps a Romanesque one. The low height of the side naves makes it possible for the temple to be illuminated by its windows, which generate large lunettes in the central canyon (cuts)<sup>4</sup>. These windows still have their alabasters preserved—the translucent stones that were used instead of glass and which filter a milky and soft light. The alabasters, in the current lighting of the temple, emphasize the choir and grant the nave a clear uniformity.

It is easy to imagine this space in the 18th century, without natural light and only illuminated by the light from windows and candles, with its resplendent altarpieces, granting the whole space the mestizo character which is a product of the Andean cosmovision (Matas (2017)—Figure 6).

The dome rests directly on the pendentives, without any drum interposition, so that the four windows open in the capstone, a “curious and constructively incorrect solution” (Buschiazzo 1949, p. 17). It is divided into eight uses, employing thick ribs which rise from the central rose window, ending in windows or anthropomorphic figures. Again, it is

Buschiazzo, quoting Harold [Wethey \(1949\)](#), who points out the Mudejar influence in the constructive solution of the dome of the building ([Buschiazzo 1949](#)).



**Figure 6.** The interior architecture of Our Lady of the Angels' Temple, in the city of La Paz—view of the nave and presbytery from the choir. Photography: Josefina Matas, 2022.

### 5.3. *The Interior Architecture of Our Lady of the Angels' Temple in the City of La Paz*

The interior wealth of the temple is considerable. The altarpieces and pulpit are from the 18th century, and the front of the altar and the tabernacle are made of silver. The paintings of the presbytery, by Leonardo Flores (Figure 7), present allegories of the Virgin<sup>5</sup> and the Franciscan Order, which contribute to hierarchizing the main space of the building.



**Figure 7.** Pictures of the presbytery. Photography: Josefina Matas, 2023.



There are three important altarpieces of golden cedar: one on the main altar and two on the side altars. Their style corresponds to the second half of the 18th century, a time when the so-called Mestizo style reached its peak. The currently existing sets of altarpieces are:

*the one of the Lord of the Belt (Señor de la Pretina), the one of Lourdes and the High Altar which was gilded in the late 18th century by the artist Xavier de Vargas, who concluded the work at the same time as the closure of the vault, on 27 November 1772, and the semi-circular dome, the following year. (Mesa and Gisbert 1972, p. 216)*

Mesa and Gisbert (1972) point out that the authors of this altarpiece are the same group of altars-makers who worked in Arani and in the Cochabamba Valley. In La Paz, however, Solomonian columns were decorated with bunches of grapes and heads with shells and scrolls, and the niches, in the form of trilobed arches, alternated with mirrors in the Cuzco manner. The decoration of this monumental ensemble makes it more similar to the group of altarpieces of the department of La Paz than to those of the Cochabamba Valley—for instance, it is similar to the one of Carabuco (Figure 8).

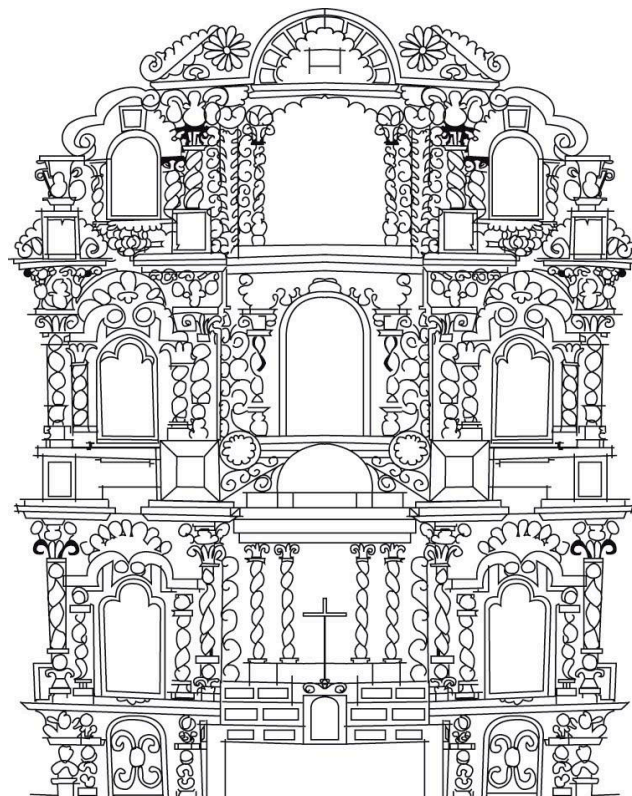


**Figure 8.** Main altarpiece of the temple of Carabuco in La Paz. Photographs: Josefina Matas, 2020.

Moving to the analysis of the main altarpiece (Figures 9 and 10), one can observe that it has three registers (levels) and three vertical segments, and rests on a pedestal with mestizo decoration. The upper part is adorned with a semicircular arch, with mirrors topped with flowering scrolls. Nowadays, there is a canvas of the Virgin crowned by the Trinity closing this ensemble. This painting belongs to the Cuzco School of the 18th century (Nicolini 2003; Vives Azancot 1985).



**Figure 9.** Main altarpiece of the Basilica of San Francisco de La Paz. Photographs: Josefina Matas, 2020.



**Figure 10.** Diagram of the main altarpiece of the Basilica of San Francisco de La Paz. Drawn by: Josefina Matas.

The intercolumns are formed by free-standing *Bacchic* columns<sup>6</sup>, supported by tenant<sup>7</sup> figures. There are niches of trilobed arches of Mudejar influence between the right feet. In the centre and first body, there is the tabernacle, inside a baldachin, supported by Solomonic columns and a semidome. The cornices that divide the registers are filled with little men in



support positions; the mirrors at the base of the columns are strategically placed to reflect the scarce light existing inside the temple. All the columns are *Bacchic*, with copious grapes, leaves, and branches<sup>8</sup>.

The niches have pedestals for the saints and are adorned with complex mouldings with grapes and acanthus leaves.

It can be established that this altarpiece—like the building—is of mestizo baroque style. This is evidenced in its decoration and, above all, by its tone of *horror vacui*. The religious symbology is evident. The vine is the symbol of the blood of Christ that was shed for the salvation of humankind. On the pedestal, the bull, a symbol of the apostle St. Luke, appears on the side of the Gospel, and the lion, an icon of St. Mark, on the side of the Epistle (Montes Bardo 1998; Ramírez González 2006; Uribe 1962). These saints appear in this altarpiece as well as on the facade. It is difficult to establish the reason for this coincidence and why these evangelists were chosen, as we do not have any documentation referring to these facts. The number of anthropomorphic heads and the little men in tenant positions is striking. These are of cedar wood and are completely gilded with gold leaf.

Moving on from the main one, there are a total of ten other altarpieces.

From the same period as the main altarpiece, there are two more: those of the Lord of the Belt (Figure 11) and that of San Francisco de Asís. These altarpieces belong to the same school. Both have two registers and three vertical sections. As in the main altarpiece, the decoration is profuse; the Solomonic columns have abundant vines and branches, with anthropomorphic figures at the bottom and top, there are large angels in a support position throughout, and trefoil arches finishing the niches. The mirrors are also part of the ensemble.



Figure 11. Altarpiece of the Lord of the Belt. Photography: Romina Gómez, 2017.

The rest of the altarpieces correspond to Saint Anthony, the Virgin of Copacabana (Figure 12), the Virgin of El Carmen, Our Lord of Veracruz, Our Lady of Remedios, Our Lord of the Column, Saint Joseph, and the Sacred Heart. They are all in mestizo baroque style.



**Figure 12.** Virgin of Copacabana altarpiece. Photographs: Romina Gómez, 2017.

As for the hierarchy of spaces suggested by the altarpieces, the main altarpiece is the one that brings together the greatest functional, formal, and symbolic content of the whole: functional, because it frames the place where Holy Mass is celebrated; formal, for having the largest dimensions; and symbolic, for being the focal point of the entire building. The rest of the altarpieces have the same hierarchy. This similarity is due to the religious and symbolic function, equality of proportion, size, and design, which places them all in the same category.

The altarpiece discourse continues to have as its central axis the Virgin and the history of the Franciscan Order. In the case of the main altarpiece, it is interesting to note that, in addition to the Franciscan saints, one can find Santo Domingo de Guzmán, the founder of the Dominicans, order of preachers, and St. Thomas Aquinas, called the Angelic Doctor for his theological wisdom, who was also a Dominican. The themes of the altarpieces are the sufferings of the Passion of the Lord, the Virgin in her different advocations, Saint Joseph, the Sacred Heart, and the Franciscan saints, accompanied by a fairly complete repertoire of the saints.

The pulpit (Figure 13) is perfectly carved, along with the canopy, and is preserved in an almost intact fashion. In front of the pulpit and four other columns, there are canopies or thrones<sup>9</sup> of equal art (Figure 14). All these elements contribute to reinforcing the notions of transcendence and infinity, as well as the lustre and gold of the sober atmosphere. These are all aesthetic strategies that converge to highlight the evangelizing role of this altarpiece art.

In summary, the interior of the temple of San Francisco condenses the concepts of Christianity in a referential architecture, where the ornamentation of the altarpieces, pulpits, and thrones allude to important characters of Western Christian culture.





**Figure 13.** Pulpit. Photographs: Romina Gómez, 2017.



**Figure 14.** Throne. Photographs: Romina Gómez, 2017.

## 6. Discussion

Art has always played an important role in the evangelization and dissemination of different religions' faith throughout history. In the Christian religion, sacred art played a fundamental role in the transmission of biblical messages and the exaltation of the figure of Jesus Christ and the saints (Godinho 2018).

One of the tasks of Spanish conquistadors and religious orders in America was the evangelization of native populations and the transmission of Christian customs through models of holiness and civilized behaviour. Most of the population was more familiar with visual language than writing, so the image was the most commonly used method for disseminating the Catholic faith.

In indigenous cultures, icons were the means of communication between divinity and humanity. Therefore, expressing abstract realities, such as the Christian dogma, was easier through signs (Martínez 2012).

For both Christian and indigenous cultures alike art was a divine gift. The artist was either a messenger of the gods or their interpreter or servant. Art was made by and for religion, so it was not difficult to reinterpret ancestral nature-based cults for Christian worship (Monreal y Tejada 2000).

To impress the viewer, Catholic art used Mannerist and baroque features. Both trends stood out for emphasizing emotional and spectacular content through artificial colours and shapes since the purpose was not to imitate nature, but to highlight the message that was transmitted (Uribe 1962).

In this way, European missionaries and settlers could effectively convey their religious message to indigenous peoples, using accessible visual language familiar to them. This art also served as a propaganda tool for the Catholic Church and the Spanish crown, which sought to consolidate their power and influence in the region.

Mestizo baroque art also has unique characteristics, such as the presence of indigenous elements along with Christian religious imagery. This art is also known for the exaggerated use of ornaments, vibrant colours, and meticulous details.

Today, it remains an important cultural legacy in Bolivia, and many of the most impressive examples can be found in churches and museums in cities such as La Paz, Sucre, and Potosí (Bonet Correa 2001; Gisbert 1991; Simoni 2003). Sacred art, including altarpieces, was an important tool of evangelization during the colonial period in Latin America, and the church of San Francisco of La Paz was no exception.

The altarpieces of the church of San Francisco de la Paz, in Bolivia, are outstanding examples of colonial sacred art—they were used, as mentioned, as tools for evangelization during the colonial period in Latin America. Through their rich ornamentation and symbolism, the altarpieces helped teach the principles of Christianity to the indigenous population of the region.

The altarpieces of the church of San Francisco, of superb workmanship, are the best in the city of La Paz: with an exuberant carving, seraphim everywhere, and Solomonic columns with abundant vines and branches of small size. The paintings of Leonardo Flores, the mirrors, the sculptures of round bulk, the trilobed niches, the flowers, and the gilding make a vibrant ensemble in a sober environment, where transcendence is especially present.

## 7. Conclusions

In short, the whole Church has been designed to communicate. And, although the building is of great constructive sobriety, with walls, vaults, and a stone dome, there is a big contrast with the great ornamental display of the interior, resulting in a space that is the product of syncretism, the fusion of two cultures. All this boasts of interior decoration which speaks of the evangelizing desire of the friars, which led them to spare nothing for God, along with the idea that the temple should be attractive for the conversion of the peoples, thus making this temple one of the most important in Latin America.

The peculiarity of the style of San Francisco resides in the importance of its decoration, which impacts the perception of the interior space; where the formal experience of anthropomorphic motifs and other naturalistic designs accumulate, symbolism expands from the exterior to the interior. This is a novel way of working with form and content, as Marco Dorta says, with a “dense tapestry that completely covers the walls and overflows from the sides” (Gutiérrez 2005, p. 167), and with an arsenal of images accumulating in the retina of the indigenous people, which metamorphosed the whole into different works of

art. Themes of vegetable, animal, and religious worlds, typical of the American universe, are added to European motifs; the parts are integrated into a whole that subordinates them and gives them coherence, thus unifying not only two cultures, but two ways of thinking.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The Franciscan Archive of La Paz (AFLP) is not listed. Thanks to the kindness of the Provincial Minister, in the years 2021 and 2022, it was possible to enter and identify the following material about the architecture of the Temple of San Francisco of La Paz.
- <sup>2</sup> Diego de Mendoza quotes: “I, Fray Marcos de Niza, of the Order of the blessed Saint Francis, commissioner of the fathers of the same order in the provinces of Peru, who was one of the first to enter them, testifying on some of the cruelties that I have seen in that land, I speak about the bad treatment and conquest made to its natives” (Mendoza [1664] 1976, p. 10).
- <sup>3</sup> Named after the Charcas, a tribe of the area. This province, when it became independent, constituted the Republic of Bolivia (today the Plurinational State of Bolivia), named after the independence hero Bolívar. It was the first colony founded in 1538 by the governor of Peru, Diego de Rojas. Today, it is the capital of Bolivia, and is also called Sucre or La Plata.
- <sup>4</sup> The barrel vault is formed by an alignment of semicircular arches.
- <sup>5</sup> One of the features of Franciscan spirituality is its love of the Most Holy Virgin Mary. Father Galdós maintains that the main altar symbolizes “the devotion of the order to the Virgin” (Galdós and Ríos 2009, p. 233).
- <sup>6</sup> This term (relating to Bacchus, the God of wine, according to the Dictionary of the Royal Spanish Academy) is used by Mesa and Gisbert (1972) to describe the incorporation of grapes in the form of a letterbox.
- <sup>7</sup> Each of the figures of angels or men supports some element of the altarpiece.
- <sup>8</sup> Green, tender, and thin shoots of vine. A decorative motif in the form of a volute or spiral.
- <sup>9</sup> The throne is called the place where the sculpture of a saint is placed when one wants to especially venerate that specific saint.

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