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Webster, Susan Verdi. Lettered Artists and the Languages of Empire: Painters and the Profession in Early Colonial Quito

Jonathan Locke Hart

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Webster, Susan Verdi.

Lettered Artists and the Languages of Empire: Painters and the Profession in Early Colonial Quito.

Austin: University of Texas Press, 2017. Pp. 333 + 53 b/w ill., 35 plates, tables. ISBN 978-1-4773-1328-2 (hardcover) US\$50.

Susan Verdi Webster begins with a signature inscription that the painter Andrés Sánchez Gallque placed on his triple portrait, *Francesco de Arobe and His Sons, Pedro and Domingo* (1599), the first signed portrait in South America. She sees this moment or trace as raising “a series of intriguing questions about painters and the profession in Quito that are entangled with issues of education, languages, literacies, and graphic technologies” (xiii). Most of the painters in early colonial Quito were Andean and could read and write. Webster pluralizes and complicates the term “empire”—including Antonio de Nebrija’s declaration in 1492: “Siempre la lengua fue compañia del imperio” (Always language is a companion of empire; my translation)—by recognizing the precontact Inca empire and the agency and power of the Inca and other Andeans in the Spanish empire (xiii).

According to Webster, many Andean painters held high administrative posts, often bore titles such as “Don” and “master,” and were parts of dynasties and networks more like pre-Hispanic moieties than European artist workshops (xiii–xiv). These painters spoke, read, wrote, and painted in many idioms (xiv). Webster equates pictorial with scriptorial documents; she focuses on the lives of the painters and the technologies, chemistry, materials, and forms of “graphic practice,” including script and painting, they adopted (xiv). The signatures reveal literacy and scribal conventions, and the images in paint show knowledge of iconography, proportion, and perspective as well as chemistry, technology, and materials (xiv). The knowledge that shaped their art for colonial audiences was local as well as imported. With this study, Webster wishes to fill the gap made by ignoring the artistic activity between 1550 and 1650, or by characterizing it as anonymous (*voz del anonimato*, the voice of the anonymous) or scarce (xiv). Paradoxically, there is a dearth of archival research on these painters despite a plethora of documentary evidence in the archive. Despite being mediated, notarial contracts reveal the profession and society in which these painters worked (xiv). Webster recounts the usual narrative of influence from Juan de Illescas through Andrés Sanchez Gallque to Miguel

de Santiago into a unified “Quito School” (xiv–xv). Santiago, often thought to be Spanish, was Andean, something Ángel Justo Estebaranz uncovered and which serves as a point of departure for Webster (xv). Webster explores the literacies and languages of painters and establishes the identities, practices, and historical contexts in previous generations (xv). She examines the profession, mobility, and trajectories of these earlier painters, asserting that they were less linear and more unruly than previously thought. Even though the Dominican confraternities and Franciscan *colegios* helped to foster some of Quito’s indigenous painters, we need, as Webster argues, to take into account local and transient European painters as well as the independence and agency of the Native painters who signed contracts and worked in the market (xv).

Webster also stresses the human geography and history of Quito, founded in 1534: a centre of the *audiencia* (royal judicial court); a bustling city that, like Lima and Potosí, was part of a local, regional, and global trade network (xv–xvi); a city full of religious institutions. Quito went from a population of 10,000 in 1600 to 50,000 in 1650, becoming a place of painting and architecture, with an indigenous majority (xvi). Quito has distinct circumstances, different, for instance, from Cuzco, but, like Cuzco, it was built on the site of an Inca settlement. In fact, Quito was the seat of Atahualpa, the last Inca sovereign and whose son, Francisco Atahualpa, continued the dynasty and whose residence was a key site of artistic activity (xvi–xvii). Painters from the non-Inca groups, as well as from European and Creole origins, worked in Quito (xvii). Webster explores the literacies and languages of the painters as they practised. The structure of her book is in two parts: the first examines the profession of painting and the second uses archival evidence to explore the lives and activities of Andean, Creole, and European painters. Webster’s study, which analyzes literacy and language as means to gain status and power, has a great range, including Andrés Sánchez and Mateo Mexía and an appendix with transcriptions of artistic contracts (xvii).

In the first part of the monograph, Webster examines contexts. The question of power and status is one that sees Francisco and Alonso Atahualpa, the apex of the Inca elite, sharing with Andrés Sánchez Gallque the acquisition, appropriation, and manipulation of “literate technologies to claim status and authority” (4). The Andean painters, to speak and document the language of empire, could partly draw on tradition and training from the Inca empire (41). Colonial Quito had an informal market for paintings for local shops, public

auctions, verbal commissions, informal receipts (*vales*), and a formal economy in which painters and painters signed a contract before a notary (43). There was also a trade in prints and illustrated books (46). The techniques, materials, and forms in the painting in Quito were pre-Columbian Andean and European (58–59). Painters in Quito, largely indigenous and not organized in guilds, painted and gilded canvasses and painted stone, metal, wood, walls, altars, sculpture, buildings, choir books, playing cards, furniture, decorations, and theatrical scenery (63, 72–73). Webster examines the homes, families, neighbourhoods, artistic production, professional practices, and economic activities of colonial Quito's Andean and European painters (88).

The second part of the book discusses the painters. Webster looks at the first generations of painters from about 1550 to 1615, starting with the first mentions in the records, including the European immigrants to Quito in the 1530s and 1540s, such as Petro Gocial; the Creole painters from the 1580s, like Juan Ponce and Pedro Bedón; and the Andean painters (91–92). They generally made a good living (122–23). In terms of the language of empire and language-within-language, Webster analyzes the signature and the painting of Gallque, which has fascinated so many (124–46). Webster examines the generation from 1615 to 1650, including painting, sculpture, furnishings, and altarpieces, and provides beautiful plates of the art (147–84). Andean painters, a larger group than the European and Creole painters, migrated to Quito, and the styles among the painters varied greatly among artists and dynasties (184). Webster also analyzes Mateo Mexía and the languages of style. She finds Mexía intriguing owing to his artistic and technical versatility and his pictorial idiom (185–210). The painters of Quito were interpreters and intermediaries who communicated to multiple audiences and whom the languages of empires shaped in their creations and professional practices (215). Webster makes these lettered artists vital in their context, painting, and profession.

JONATHAN LOCKE HART

Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies
University of Toronto