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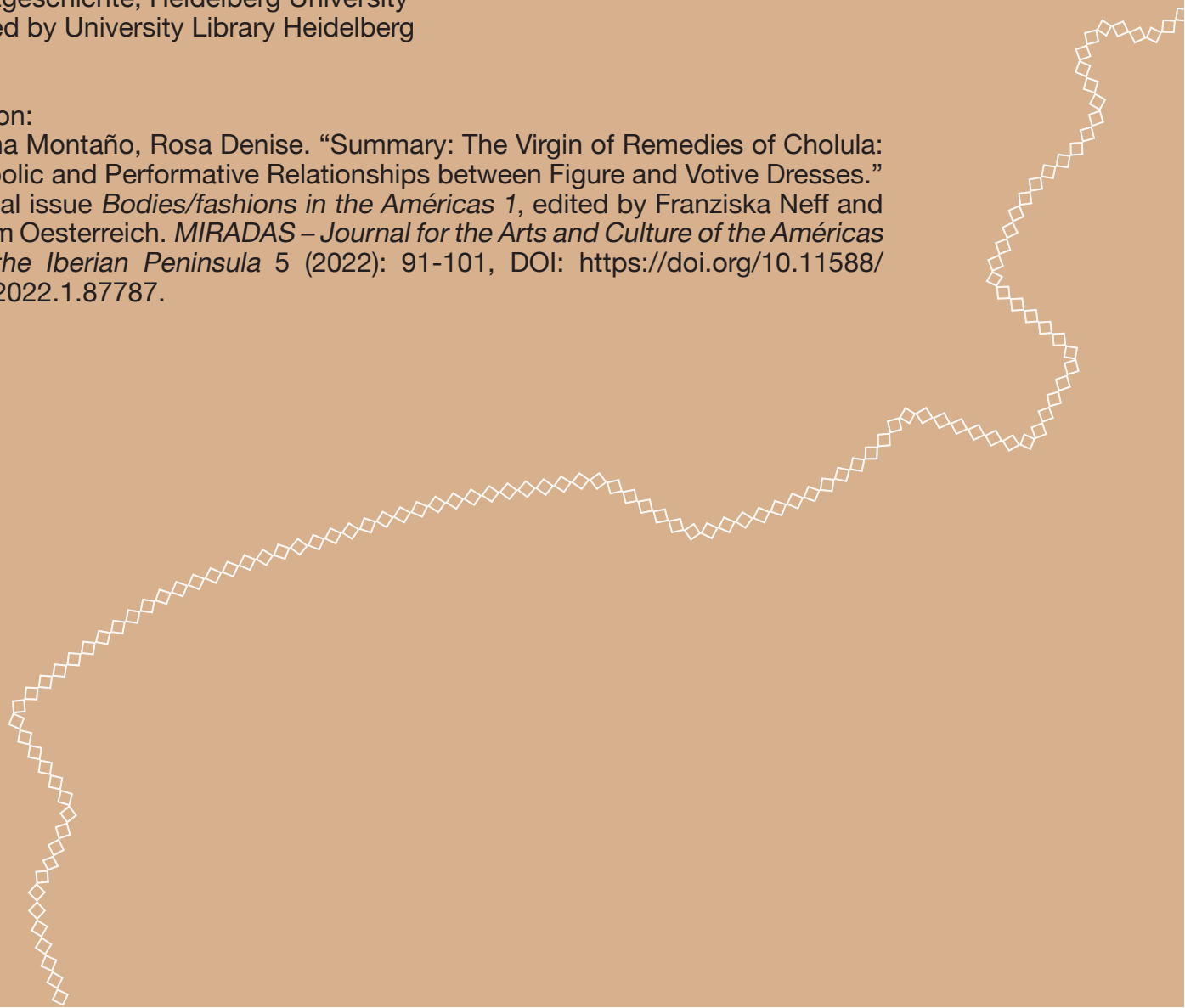
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SUMMARY

The Virgin of Remedies of Cholula: Symbolic and Performative Relationships between Figure and Votive Dresses

Rosa Denise Fallena Montaña

Abstract

The main purpose of this paper is to explore how the superimposed dresses, jewels and ornaments of the cult image of Our Lady of Remedy of Cholula functioned as symbolic elements in its iconography. In addition, an attempt is made to analyse its different uses in the construction of identity imaginaries in the rhetoric of the conquest and foundation in New Spain, especially the way it is represented in the Map of Cuauhtlantzinco. Also, dresses and ornaments played an essential role in ensuring that the vera efigie, through its “true portraits”, was recognized and venerated by the devotees. The clothes given by donors was a way of bonding affectively with the image through performative practices, for example, in the dressing ceremony, the patron saint festivities and prayer processions.

Keywords: *Virgen Mary • dresses • religious images • ornaments • Cholula*

Our Lady of Remedies has been considered the patron saint of the city of Cholula, at least since the end of the colonial period. Her image kept in her sanctuary is one of the oldest wooden Marian devotional statuettes that remain in Mexico and that still has a wide cult today. Her sanctuary was established in central Mexico in the 16th century, in an indigenous town (pueblo de indios), near one of the principal cities in New Spain, Puebla de los Angeles. At this point, it is important to highlight that Cholula is found in a very strategic geographical site because it is located on the main road that used to connect the central plateau with the Gulf of Mexico region, since pre-Columbian times, and in Mesoamerican religious beliefs, it was considered a sacred place. Her sanctuary was suggestively established by the Franciscan friars during the first evangelization at the top of one of the largest pyramids in Mesoamerica built in Cholula, known as the Great Pyramid and which in Nahuatl was called *Tlachihualtepetl*, which means: “mountain-made-by-man-hand”. Perhaps that is the main reason why Our Lady of Los Remedies is, to this day, amicably called “Virgen del cerrito” (Virgin of the hill).

While the image continues to be worshiped among parishioners in the region in central Mexico since long time ago, surprisingly the historiography of the effigy, from the fields of art history and visual studies, is scarce. That is why I decided to do my research on this important devotional piece several years ago. On the other hand, there is little research on the ornaments and dresses that used to be worn by cult images in New Spain, and Our Lady of Remedies of Cholula is undoubtedly an eloquent example on this subject.

Having this in mind, the first purpose of this article is to explore the symbolic and performative implications that had had the ornaments and dresses that were superimposed to the carved wooden image along its cultural biography. The image of Our Lady of Cholula is a small gilded polychrome wooden statuette, it is about 35 cm long and was probably made in Spain or New Spain in the last decade of the 16th century. It has an archaic late gothic style and was intended for domestic worship. However, since the beginning of its cult, it has received public veneration and has been displayed on the altar of the sanctuary, until today, ostentatiously dressed and wearing precious jewels. Some parts of this sculpture were even cut out at some point in the past with the intention of making it easier to add different kinds of ornaments.

It is obvious that these elements added to the image were not mere decorative accessories, on the contrary, they were fundamental to compose the iconographic program with a deep symbolic theological sense. In this way, the rich and complex paraphernalia was clearly intended to represent this little effigy of the Theotokos

(Mother of God) as the Queen of Haven, New Eve and as the Woman of the Apocalypse in the public cult. But even more it should be noted that all the adornments and clothes were intended to hide the original iconography of the sculpture, which corresponds to the Immaculate Conception of Mary, with the intention of changing the advocatio to Lady of the Remedies. A small image of the Child Jesus was even attached to her chest, over the superimposed dress.

The oldest mentions of the cult of the Virgin of Cholula can be found in some documents preserved in the historical notarial archive of the city of Cholula. In a document dated 1590, a woman ordered in her will to offer the image, of whom she was devoted, a rich dress (skirt). In fact, the Franciscan friar Jerónimo de Mendieta in his chronicle written at the end of the 16th century stated that by 1594 the cult of the Virgin of Cholula had spread widely throughout the region. The change of the advocatio and iconography suggests that it was intended to symbolically associate the cult with the Spanish conquerors. Since the Reconquest in the Iberian Peninsula, Virgin of Remedies was considered the protector of men at war.

The expensive ornaments that were given by the devotees of the elites to the image as offerings was a way to show their wealth and at the same time, their devotion to the Virgin and promote her cult. In addition, the treasure of the saint patron figure reflected the wealth of the city's inhabitants metaphorically personified in the sacred image.

Another aspect that I maintain is that the luxurious dresses, mantles and veils enriched with gold, silver and precious gems were designed to 'enlarge' the dimensions of the modest statuette in the eyes of the beholder, transforming it into a heavenly vision surrounded by sparkles of light. In this way, the devotees, instead of seeing only the inanimate material figure, could have evoked using their imagination the splendor and the perfect beauty of Virgin Mary. In this sense, I propose that everything that was used to embellish the image and other sensory resources used as stimuli in religious ceremonies were aimed at 'charging' the sacred imago with what William Taylor has called "charisma."

In the second part I explore the way in which Our Lady of Cholula was represented in a late colonial codex known as the Codex Campos or Map of Cuauhtlanzinco kept in the Tulane University Library. In this 18th century Codex, Our Lady of Remedies of Cholula appears in the sky where a battle of the conquest in the 16th century takes place. The Spanish conquerors, commanded by Hernán Cortés,

and allied with the Cholultecan chiefs, fight against the indigenous people who lived in the Chichimeca region. Here the image of the Virgin is quite ambiguous, it is difficult to guess if it is the representation of the material image on its silver base of the sanctuary, or is the Virgin herself endowed with life. As David Morgan has suggested, the garments of the religious images added to the idea of “being more real”.

In the pictorial discourse of the Map of Cuauhtlanzinco it is clear that it was intended to associate the cult of the Cholultecan image with the victory of the Spanish forces through an apologetic and providential narrative to legitimize the privileges of an indigenous noble lineage that supposedly helped the conquerors to spread Christianity through the north of New Spain. In this program the iconographic motifs belonging to the advocacy of the Remedies, displayed through the dresses of the image, are fundamental to establish the association with the Spanish conquerors and to denote the Virgin as a founding saint patron, symbolically identified with the Cholultecan territory and the construction of collective imaginaries of identity in a ‘new era’ after de conquest. In this regard, it is very significant that in the Codex painting, the Tlachihuatepetl is represented as a symbolic toponymy of Cholula, a sacred place marked by the hierophany of Mother of God.

To be recognized by devotees, it is not surprising that the image of the Virgin of Cholula was frequently depicted on stamps and other religious souvenirs crowned, having a silver halo around her head, and wearing magnificent dresses, holding the Child Jesus also richly attired and wearing the heavenly imperial crown. In these pictures the sacred imago is represented as how it was displayed in the sanctuary. These pictures functioned as *vera efigie* or true portraits, and it was believed that they shared miraculous powers with the image worshiped in the sanctuary. An engraving of this genre is preserved in a sermon published in 1728 to thank the Virgin of Cholula intervention by protecting the merchant fleet that arrived safely in Spain. In this engraving the image of Our Lady of Remedies is represented wearing a shaped bell dress in rococo style, decorated with lace and flower embroidery. In the text of the sermon there is an evident metaphorical allusion to the Virgin as a bright sun that is also expressed in the luminosity of the ornaments of the garment of the image represented in the engraving.

In a later lithograph, dated 1850, the sacred image of the Virgin of Cholula also wears a beautifully ornamented shaped bell dress, but in this example, it can be seen in the details that the taste had changed, compared to the engraving published before in 1728. In the lithography the neoclassical style predominates in the architecture of the altar as well as in the attire of the Virgin and the Child

Jesus. In both cases some hints are given about the importance of displaying the image with all its rich attire and ornaments. Through these examples it is plausible to affirm that the modest wooden statuette functioned as a bearer of symbolic motifs that constantly changed depending on tastes, aesthetic values or religious narratives. In this way, the image played a role as a social entity with active agency.

The last part of this work delves into the importance of the ceremony of changing the clothing of the image by women belonging to the *mayordomía* that it is performed now a days in the Virgin's dressing room that is located behind the altar of the sanctuary. Unfortunately, there are no documents where the ceremony of the change of clothes in the colonial era is narrated. However, comparing some sources of images venerated in Spain in the 16th and 17th centuries, we can have an idea of the customs in New Spain regarding the change of clothing of religious images. To a certain extent, it resembles the tradition that prevails until now in Cholula. Without a doubt, the change of clothes allowed the inanimate image to be treated as if it were a living person and allowed it to be touched and manipulated under a strict moral and respectful code. Through these performative practices, the sacred object could become closer to certain privileged people and dispense its prodigious qualities through direct contact.

The Church was openly reticent about the ornament and dress of devotional images from the first ecclesiastical councils of New Spain in the 16th century. However, during the following centuries the debate on this subject continued. While one faction considered that the paraphernalia of the images served to increase the pious affections of the devotees, others argued that these practices went against decorum and decency and so much adornment alienated the devotee from true devotion. Indeed, it is necessary to point out the paradox that arose in the dress and ornament of religious images. The ornamentation and clothing of the images invariably implied a tension between opposing forces: magnifying the image's charisma or, at the opposite pole, trivializing it and undermining decorum, causing scandal and displeasure. It must be added that the tastes and practices of popular piety did not always coincide with the concepts of ecclesiastical elites and with religious art treaties, mainly after the council of Trent. The sensual orientation of the ornaments impaired any rational or spiritual reflection. Despite all these issues, as was reviewed in the case of Cholula, ornaments, luxurious attires and precious jewelry, more than accessories to embellish the image, merely from a sensory enjoyment point of view, at a deeper level were an essential part of the functioning of the imago considered as a sacred object with active agency.



Fig. 1. *Our Lady of Remedies* without her attire, unidentified authors, 16th-17th centuries, sanctuary of Our Lady of Remedies, Cholula, Puebla. Photo: John O'Leary, 2013.



Fig. 2. *Our Lady of Remedies* with her attire, unidentified authors, 16th-17th centuries, sanctuary of Our Lady of Remedies, Cholula, Puebla. Photo: Denise Fallena, 2011.



Fig. 3. Ornamental structure of *Our Lady of Remedies*, unidentified author, 18th and 19th centuries, sanctuary of Our Lady of Remedies, Cholula, Puebla. Photo: John O'Leary, 2013.



Fig. 4. Map of Cuauhtlantzinco, plate 7, unidentified author, ca. 1750, Tulane University Library, New Orleans. Digital image public domain.



Fig. 5. Map of Cuauhtlantzinco, plate 8, unidentified author, ca. 1750, Tulane University Library, New Orleans. Digital image public domain.



Fig. 6. Map of Cuauhtlantzinco, plate 19, unidentified author, ca. 1750, Tulane University Library, New Orleans. Digital image public domain.



Fig. 7. Frontispiece of the Sermon that in thanksgiving for the successful detention in Havana of this last Fleet, and its miraculous arrival to our European Ports, making the Feast the Branch of Commerce of Spain, was preached in the Sanctuary of N. Señora de los Remedios, engraving, unidentified author, 1728. José María Lafragua Library Collection, BUAP.



Fig. 8. Our Lady of Remedies of Cholula, unidentified author, ca. 1850, lithograph. Private collection of Jaime Cuadriello.

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