

SO CLOSE, SO FAR

Review of the exhibition: *Return Journey. Art of the Americas in Spain*
– *Tornaviaje. Arte iberoamericano en España* (Madrid, Museo
Nacional del Prado, October 5, 2021 – February 13, 2022)



Reviewed by
Olga Isabel Acosta Luna

Up until February 13, 2022, the Prado Museum in Madrid presented the temporary exhibition *Return Journey. Art of the Americas in Spain* (*Tornaviaje. Arte iberoamericano en España*) curated by Rafael López Guzmán and assisted by Jaime Cuadriello and Pablo Amador,¹ globally recognized as long-standing specialists in the field of research that historiographically is known as Viceroyalty or Colonial American art. It is striking that, although since the founding of the Prado Museum in 1819, the art of the American continent had been largely ignored, now for the second time this century this institution is dedicating an exhibition to it. The first exhibition, eleven years ago, was held as part of the commemoration of the bicentennial of American Independence from Spain and was entitled *Painting from the Viceroyalties. Shared Identities in the Hispanic World* (Museo Nacional del Prado and Palacio Real: October 26, 2010 – January 30, 2011). For that occasion, a wide selection of paintings by artists of American and European origin were shown. These artists were especially linked to the centers of power of the two great viceroyalties during the sixteenth to eighteenth century in what we now call Central America and South America. Unlike that exhibition, *Return Journey*

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Rafael López Guzmán is a professor at the University of Granada in Spain and Jaime Cuadriello and Pablo F. Amador are members of the Institute of Aesthetic Research (Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas) at UNAM in Mexico.

appealed to a greater thematic variety with a broader, more diversified selection of pieces, actors, materialities, and geographies.

Specifically, the term *Tornaviaje* (*Return Journey* in English) refers to the feat carried out in October 1565 by Miguel López Legazpi, Fray Andrés de Urdaneta, and their crew when they returned safely to the port of Acapulco from Manila thanks to the maritime currents of Kuro Shivo. Such maritime prowess made it possible to establish the commercial route known as the *Manila Galleon* or the *China Nao* and finally materialize the desire of the Hispanic monarchy to establish its own direct commercial route between Asia and Europe. The *Tornaviaje* originated a complex and long-lasting phenomenon of global importance that linked multiple commercial, religious, artistic, and social exchanges, as well as permanent encounters and migrations of women and men, ideas and tastes, linking Asia, America, Europe, and Africa thanks to its annual round trips between the ports of Manila, Acapulco, Veracruz, Cádiz, and Seville (1565–1815).

The exhibition this time added further meaning to the term *Tornaviaje*. In this case, the return journey referred in sum to American cultural contributions found in Spain and by extension in Europe. Beyond the particularity of the pieces exhibited or the topics addressed, the Prado emphasized for the visiting public this meaning of *Tornaviaje*: to reverse the route and highlight the influence that America had on Europe. With this new direction, the exhibition dismantled the traditional and condemnatory idea that has judged colonial art only as an art derived from European traditions. This idea has echoed the controversial equation proposed by Ángel Guido in the 1920s² when he defined colonial art as the product of “a mixture” between European and indigenous art, thus racializing both American artistic productions and their creators. For more than a century this approach has dominated and been reiterated by different American and European historiographies that have judged the art of early modernity in America as minor and has even cataloged it as a curiosity, rarity, or ethnographic object, rather than identify it as a work of art. *Tornaviaje* leaves aside the arbitrary value judgment and starts from the premise that the various American productions are works of art without distinction of techniques, themes, or authors.

Therefore, choosing the term *Tornaviaje* as the title for the Prado Museum exhibition was an appropriate political strategy that could also be understood as an action of reparation in the face of historical oblivion and invisibility in the relationship established by Spain with its former overseas territories. For this reason, the museum opened its spaces so that its audiences could finally listen to valuable Spanish and Latin American researchers both in the room and at the conferences held during the period of the exhibition. This approach, on which the museum, in recent years,

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Tristan Weddigen, *Hispano-Incaic Fusions*. Ángel Guido and the Latin American Reception of Heinrich Wölfflin, in: *Art in Translation* 9/sup1 2017, 92–120.

had already made some progress, engages in curatorial and museographic actions that have sought to create a change in the appreciation of American art by Spanish and European audiences. Thus, we find, for example, the presence in the Prado Museum of the canvas known as the *Marriages of Martín de Loyola with Beatriz Ñusta and of Juan de Borja to Lorenza Ñusta de Loyola* (1718). “La Ñusta”, as it is known in Peru, is one of the most emblematic works of the Pedro de Osma Museum in Lima.³ The painting alludes to the union between the Inca nobility and the Jesuit order through two marriages celebrated in 1572 and 1611 in Cusco and Madrid, respectively. For two months in 2019, this work established a dialog with other canvases contemporary to its date of creation and with works considered great milestones of European art in the Prado Museum.

I. The Exhibition

Rafael López Guzmán underlined in the inaugural conference⁴ that the exhibition especially aimed to value the interweaving and cultural hybridization that took place in America from the sixteenth century onwards, when diverse population groups – such as local indigenous cultures, newcomers from Spain and other parts of Europe, Africa, and Asia – met and lived together in the same place. This confluence resulted in a new material culture that often migrated to the Iberian Peninsula. In this way, today in Europe and especially in Spain there are numerous objects of American manufacture, often poorly identified and barely understood and valued. Pablo Amador has demonstrated this well through various sculptures of crucified Christs created in large format and light weight due to their materiality – paper and corn stalk – and made in series in Michoacán and Mexico City since the sixteenth century and whose examples can be found today on both sides of the Atlantic.⁵ Precisely, for *Tornaviaje*, 107 diverse works were brought together with multiple histories, cartographies, and agents, created in the current countries of Guatemala, Ecuador, Peru, Cuba, Panama, Colombia, Mexico, Bolivia, Nicaragua, Venezuela, and the Dominican Republic, among others, but coming mostly from collections located in twenty-five different provinces of Spain.

About a hundred objects gathered for the exhibition were organized in two lower rooms of the museum around two spatial concepts that sought to make urban planning and social relations in

³ Gabriela Machuca Castillo, “La Ñusta”. La historia del regreso a casa del lienzo cusqueño de 1718 que brilló en el Museo del Prado, in: *El Comercio*, 22.05.2019.

⁴ Rafael López Guzmán, *Geografía cultural Iberoamericana. La exposición “Tornaviaje”*, conference given at the Prado Museum on October 13, 2021.

⁵ Pablo F. Amador Marrero, Las obras desde su materialidad. Impronta indiana, in: *Tornaviaje. Arte Iberoamericano en España* (exh. cat. Madrid, Prado Museum), ed. by Pablo F. Amador Marrero, Adrián Contreras-Guerrero, Jaime Cuadriello, Gloria Espinosa Spinola, and Rafael López Guzmán, Madrid 2021, 103–143, here 103–110.

American cities understandable to visitors: the main square and the conventual atrium. Whereas the main square was the place where society and its diversity converged through trade and exchange, the conventual atrium appealed more to a didactic place that activated the ties and intersections between social groups. In turn, the two rooms were divided into four thematic axes: "Geography, Conquest and Society", "Images and Cults, Away and Back", "Art Crossings", and, finally, the "Legacy of the New World". Thematic axes were similarly subdivided in the rooms and in the catalog into other themes such as: Territory and Conquest, People of the Americas, Market and City, Native Apelles, Portable Paintbrush, Indiano Effects, Silver from the Indies, Spanish Forms, American Clothing, etc.

The two central spaces of the exhibition – the main square and the conventual atrium – were structured museographically through two leading objects that, due to their shape, format, size, and materiality, made visible the sumptuousness of the objects that crossed the Atlantic to the Peninsula. These objects were a folding screen and a processional cross, both from the seventeenth century. The screen, made in New Spain, is today part of a private collection in Spain and was exhibited some months prior at the Prado Museum as a guest work. This "furniture painting" has ten wooden bodies covered with oil paints and gold leaf that represent, on the one hand, the history of the Conquest of Tenochtitlan and, on the other, Mexico City. The processional cross is a piece 2.5 meters high, delicately made of openwork silver and filigree by Jerónimo de Espellosa, a silversmith active in Havana. Today this monumental cross is found in the Matriz Parish of San Marcos Evangelista, in the Diocese of San Cristóbal de La Laguna. Together with these central pieces, evoking the halls of wonders of European courts, the exhibition displayed a careful selection of pieces that left no doubt about the plurality of early modern American art. This plurality was visible in the diversity of typologies, materials, iconographies, and formats only possible due to the complex network of exchanges and migrations between America, Asia, Africa, and Europe. Thus, the visiting public was presented with paintings on various supports and forms with portraits or iconographies of famous miraculous images. These paintings were contrasted with a stuffed alligator, sculptures, liturgical objects, caskets, reliquaries, desks, bowls, tibores and jewels made in tortoiseshell, polychrome wood, grass varnish, coconut nuts, tecomate bark, clay, silver, mother-of-pearl and ceramics, among multiple combinations of materials.

II. The Dürer Effect

Paradoxically, the various conceptual and thematic frameworks of the exhibition could be easily missed by a public who came to observe this American heritage in Europe for the first time. This was a public that was curious but often ignorant of the complex American histories and cartographies that followed the European

invasion from the fifteenth century onwards. However, beyond the information compiled on the walls, the magnificence of objects so diverse in their iconography, composition, use, materiality, and format must have captured the gaze of the unsuspecting visitor. As the exhibition well recalled in one of its room texts, something similar had happened in 1520 with Albrecht Dürer in Brussels when he saw objects sent by Hernán Cortés from Mexico to the future emperor Charles V. Then, Dürer recorded his discovery in his diary and with it his valuation changed:

Diese ding sind alle köstlich gewesen, das man sie beschätzt vmd hundert tausend werth. Und ich hab aber all mein lebtag nichts gesehen das mein hercz also erfreuet hat als diese ding. Dann ich hab darin gesehen wunderliche künstliche ding und hab mich verwundert der subtilen jngenia der menschen jn frembden landen.⁶

It is through the typological, material, iconographic, and utilitarian plurality of the pieces exhibited in the Prado Museum, that the curators and the directors of the museum often emphasized the exhibition's main goal: that the Spanish and European public first discover and then immediately value the American heritage, a heritage whose origin has been lost in memory, but whose objects are part of the daily life of the Spanish people. Hence the generous risk taken – also visible in the advertising and marketing of the exhibition – to exploit the exhibition of the Gentlemen of Esmeraldas and the forgotten *Moctezuma* from one of the rooms of the Museo degli Argenti in Florence. Although these two paintings have been exhibited in both Spanish and Italian collections for decades, it was only during the *Tornaviaje* exhibition that they enjoyed an unusual fame that highlighted their “otherness” through their color and clothing, a type of diversity that was ultimately viewed with interest.

This is the paradox through which the exhibition clearly draws the viewer's attention: America has represented an invisible and alien past, despite its proximity to and its role in the daily lives of contemporary Spaniards. Thus, the exhibition revealed a historiographical and patrimonial distance between Europe and America, the latter a continent that for decades, from the United States to Chile, has recognized in its collections that the art produced and consumed during the peninsula's dominance is part of a global circuit. However, the ignorance and invisibility displayed toward this heritage has meant its traditional and systematic relegation to a subordinate, exoticizing, and folkloric role in Europe and its museums.

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Hans Rupprich (ed.), *Dürer. Schriftlicher Nachlass*, erster Band, Berlin 1956, 155. “These things have all been costly, that one has valued them at hundred thousand gulden worth. And yet I have all days of my life seen nothing that has thus delighted my heart as these things. For I have seen among them wondrous artificial things [wunderliche künstliche ding] and have wondered at the subtle ingenia of the people in foreign lands.” Taken from: Christian Feest, *From Calicut to America. Albrecht Dürer and the “Wondrous Artificial Things” from the “New Golden Land”*, in: Jochen Sander (ed.), *Albrecht Dürer. His Art in Context*, Munich 2013, 367–375.

This has happened in a radical way in Spain, which has received, since the end of the fifteenth century, and keeps in its royal cabinets riches from the “New World” that today are guarded in the magnificent, but lonely and distant Museum of America in Madrid. It seems that the famous canvases of the Quito painter Andrés Sánchez Gallque or the New Spain artist Miguel Cabrera still do not meet the standards deemed sufficient to share space in European art galleries with contemporaries such as Titian, Diego Velázquez, Peter Paul Rubens, or Francisco de Goya. We trust that the *Tornaviaje* exhibition has created an echo loud enough that American art and American artists will soon occupy a temporary space and hopefully a permanent one in the rooms of the Prado Museum alongside their “great” contemporary European artists, not as derivative creations without their own value, but with their own agency and sharing the scene equally.

III. So Close, So Far

The *Tornaviaje*'s efforts should be applauded and valued; a museum owes itself to its audiences and that was the basis for the commitment that the Prado Museum undertook with this exhibition. However, it is important to point out that the exhibition was aimed especially at a Spanish and European audience that is unaware of the importance of America in its own history. This was the exhibition's main virtue, but also its most shocking feature for American audiences, or for that matter, audiences of any nationality external to the local networks who do not need to recognize the obvious. In that sense, *Tornaviaje* was, despite its name, still provincial and myopic. The exhibition faced the problem of its local environment and ignored a global reality that no longer requires the approval of the “great museums” and their audiences to make visible, value, and study diverse heritage. Other examples carried out in other museums around the world have taught us that in order to value ignored and often despised heritage, it is not necessary to insert and accommodate American, Asian, and African productions in the canon of Western art history that has been created and approved by the centers of European power since the times of Vasari and Winckelmann.

The justification that motivated the *Tornaviaje* exhibition becomes difficult to understand when we add to the equation that Madrid is also home to the Museo de América and its extraordinary collections. Founded during the dictatorship of Francisco Franco, on October 12, 1965, this museum houses the royal American collections. Whoever walks through the permanent exhibition halls of the Museo de América today will notice an exceptional richness in the collections preserved in this space, comprising more than 20,000 pieces.⁷ This constitutes the largest and most important American

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M. C. García Sáiz and F. Jiménez Villalba, Museo de América, mucho más que un museo, in: *Artígrama* 24, 2009, 83–118, here 93.

collection outside the American continent. Unfortunately, it is a museum rarely visited by the Spanish public and by the millions of tourists from around the world who travel to Madrid every year. It is incredible that it is still necessary to move the oeuvres of this museum a few blocks to the rooms of the Prado Museum to make this heritage visible and appreciated. If the pieces are housed in ethnographic, naval, or art museums in Europe, it matters little for those audiences who, like Dürer, do not need external approval to recognize their value.