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Re-Thinking *Retórica Cristiana* through Space and Performance: A Sixteenth-Century Case of Image and Text

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Abstract

Defining the colonial situation of a specific region presents myriad challenges. In a contemporary context, how does one interpret visual culture created hundreds of years previously to explain a colonial period and consequently, contribute to the conceptualization of colonialism by providing mechanisms for interpretation? Increasingly larger more abstract concepts such as space and performance appear frequently in colonial scholarship. Each concept remains abstract enough so that their application to the colonial situation often suits different contexts and varying artistic media. This paper examines how space and performance function as interpretive tools using the images and text of *Retórica Cristiana* as a model for interpretation. Written by a Mexican Franciscan friar and published in Italy, *Retórica Cristiana* examines ideas concerning Christian evangelization in the Americas. Relationships between image and text affect the readability of a given work. Translating the narrative of Valadés's images involves an acknowledgement of the story that the images tell and their relationship to the overarching themes embedded in the actual text. Many colonial friars produced books that outlined missionary efforts. *Retórica Cristiana* belongs to a corpus of literature produced by sixteenth-century clergymen attempting to describe aspects of colonial Mexico. With his heavily Europeanized images, Valadés negotiates the Mexican imagery he gleaned from his formative years and the Western influences of his formal education and travels to Europe.



Introduction

In the case of art made during the colonial period in Mexico, the conceptualization of space and performance occurs in diverse settings. Religious plays demonstrate social agency and actively manipulate public space to teach Christianity and the architectural layout of the *convento* complex, a type of monastery compound, provides both indigenous and Spanish residents of the newly formed colonies a stage for complex social interaction and religious theater. Space becomes understood as the area in which objects are located, relationships are negotiated, and narratives are created. Performance refers to activity enacted with intent and includes the sacred rituals and daily practices of a given culture. The twenty-seven religiously-motivated illustrations of *Retórica Cristiana*, created by Franciscan friar Diego Valadés, demonstrate the significance of space and performance in the sixteenth century and provide a basis for theoretical application while simultaneously enhancing the layers of meaning present in the images and text.

In certain cases image works with text in a manner that increases the readability of *Retórica Cristiana*, while at other points, the images and textual information of the book function independently. Some images appear as full-page illustrations, while others reside centrally in the composition surrounded by text above and below. Image and text function most literally in cases where Valadés locates a letter within individual components of the illustrations. These letters reoccur as a denotative function in the text where they provide a visual description for the images. In other cases, images serve as narratives themselves as Valadés omits guiding letters, thus enabling the viewer to construct the intended message.

Published in Perugia, Italy, *Retórica Cristiana* explains various aspects of the Franciscan mission in colonial Mexico. Though Valadés wrote his book and created the accompanying images outside of the geographic colonial context, his life and work were products of the colonial situation. To facilitate his own missionary work in colonial Mexico, Valadés learned three indigenous languages, Nahuatl, Otomí, and Tarasco. The book he produced in Italy demonstrates his loyalty to the Franciscan Order, whose missionary efforts needed some defense in the later half of the sixteenth century. As a



loyal subject, Valadés addressed the significance of obedience to the Pope, Emperor Charles V, and his successors (Valadés, 1989: 399). In Europe, people questioned the idea that the native population fully denounced their previous beliefs and accepted the Christian faith as their only spiritual outlet. In addition to conversion skepticism, there was concern among the Franciscans about the early successes of the Jesuits upon their arrival in the Americas in 1572.

The life of Diego Valadés sparks much intrigue when considering his various pursuits as skilled artist, scholar, missionary, and ultimately, published author. During a time when only select members of the population traveled across the Atlantic, Valadés received the opportunity to travel to Europe from Mexico and created a text that is a product of different cultural influences. Born in Tlaxcala in 1533, Valadés spent his formative years studying with the Franciscans. As he transitioned into adulthood, he pursued studies of art and rhetoric under the tutelage of Franciscans, most notably Pedro de Gante, in Mexico City. From approximately 1543 to 1553, Valadés studied and worked with de Gante, although his mentor's influence would continue to impact his life (Palomera, 1988: 61). After serving as a missionary for many years in Tlaxcala and among the Chichimecs, who inhabited the modern states of Zacatecas and Durango in Northern Mexico, Valadés traveled to Europe. Valadés separated himself from his fellow Franciscan friars in the Americas by traveling to Spain and Italy. The opportunity to travel to Europe proved quite significant as few students at the school of Santiago Tlatelolco traveled to Europe for education (Estarellas, 1962: 237). In Rome, Valadés began an appointment at the Vatican, serving as Procurator General of the Americas, a prestigious position, though one he would hold for just a few years. Traditionally, a procurator holds administrative authority and oversees a particular body of people. Due to his appointment, Valadés knew Cardinal Sireto, one of the most influential people in the Renaissance court (Palomera, 1988: 140) and likely other significant individuals as well. After traveling to Europe, Valadés never returned home to Mexico, he died in approximately 1582 (Palomera, 1988: 12). His individual achievements are an important part of the history of the Franciscans in Mexico.



Retórica Cristiana drew its audience from the clergy and other well-educated people familiar with issues of rhetoric and memory and well-versed in Latin. Valadés understood the significance of history and individuality, expressing reverence for St. Francis, Martin de Valencia, and Pedro de Gante in his text. Holding much esteem for de Gante, Valadés recognized the importance of his tutor's teaching in his life and others in Mexico. Born in Ayghem-Sant Pierre, a suburb of Gante, Peter took the name of his homeland before traveling to the Americas and making his mark on the Franciscan mission. Known as Pedro de Gante, he was a relative of Carlos V; in fact, the Emperor asked him twice to take over as Archbishop of Mexico, but the highly regarded de Gante refused (Valadés, 1989: 497). As an artist and writer, de Gante created work that influenced Valadés. Written in Nahuatl and published in 1553, *Doctrina Cristiana*, offers a brief overview of Christianity accompanied by images such as a content Holy Family, friars working diligently, the Crucifixion of Christ, and Mary mourning the death of Christ.

While many hypothesize that Valadés's mother was indigenous and assign her the birthplace of Tlaxcala, Mexico, much more is understood about the life of his father, also named Diego Valadés. In 1536, the Franciscan population was numbered at sixty in New Spain (McCarthy, 1983: 240), ironically in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Franciscans considered halting their recruitment efforts (Gómez Canedo, 1983: 6). As the Franciscan population grew steadily in sixteenth-century New Spain, Valadés became a part of this burgeoning community. At the time that Valadés took the vows of a priest, it was still illegal for anyone of indigenous descent to pursue this vocation; this may explain the absence of Valadés's name from religious records. As a well-known *conquistador* Valadés's father would have been able to provide his son with opportunity. No documentary evidence proves that Valadés's mother was an indigenous woman. As long as this information is not verified, it remains important to treat this assumption of heritage as a hypothesis and avoid stressing Valadés's purported status as a *mestizo*.¹

¹ It is worth noting that Valadés's primary biographer believes that the friar was a *mestizo* and that his father was the Spaniard Diego Valadés and that his mother was an indigenous woman from Tlaxcala; however, Palomera does cite other theories regarding his background. Interestingly, Palomera states that Valadés may have been a legitimate son of the Spaniard and he took his name 'Diego' after gaining interest into the priesthood. (Palomera, 1988: 52-4)



Serving as a missionary in Northern Mexico among the Chichimecs and in Tlaxcala gave Valadés the necessary first-hand experience to write about the Franciscan mission. The region of Tlaxcala played a significant role in sixteenth-century colonial Mexico, as the native lords of this region sided with the Spanish against the Mexica, who controlled the valley of Mexico at the time of Spanish arrival. In fact, the Spaniards rested and regained momentum for their final siege on Tenochtitlan in Tlaxcala (Palomera, 1988: 36). Due to the support the Spanish received from *tlaxcaltecos*, the continued relationship between the colonizers and the colonized in this region proved to be complicated. As the Spanish settled into their roles as colonists, the residents of Tlaxcala wrote to the King of Spain and asked for more privileges as a result of their loyalty, and the Crown conceded to certain demands. Up a slight hill and overlooking a bull ring, the complex where Valadés worked in Tlaxcala still stands today.

In his version of Christian conversion, Valadés presents images of missionary performance that correspond to his text by depicting friars either preaching to a large crowd or surrounded by a small group in a more intimate setting. In these images the friars transform space and create religious performance in the colonial Americas by gathering indigenous groups and preaching the Christian word. He writes that friars often lectured outdoors to accommodate the large crowds (Valadés, 1989:471). In a full-page image, the friar uses a pointer to refer to images of the Passion.

Fig. 1 <<http://instructional1.calstatela.edu/bevans/Art454L-01-MapsDocsEtc/WebPage-Full.00067.html>>

From left to right the individual scenes depict the agony in the garden, the flagellation, the mocking of Christ, Christ carrying the cross, the crucifixion, the harrowing of hell, and the resurrection (Edgerton, 2001:118). Valadés presents a preacher using images in a linear narrative format to augment his words. Several sixteenth-century friars recognized the significance of the pre-Columbian codices with their vibrant, intricate imagery, as vital didactic tools among the population they wanted to convert. Using images for evangelization provided a way to communicate with the indigenous population in a manner that they were all ready familiar with, the pre-Columbian pictorial codices.



The relationship between image and oral speech references the language barrier that existed between the Spanish and the indigenous people and alludes to the art of memory. In the text that corresponds to the Letter A, found on the pulpit, Valadés states that this friar lectures in an indigenous language (Valadés, 1989:431). In the text for Letter B, found on the overhang above the pulpit, the passage states that the preacher uses a pointer to signal to the audience the imagery he refers to in his speech. Textual information remains quite literal and structured. For Letter C, located on the shoulder of a man in the front row, Valadés provides some contextual information by stating that those who possess stick-like canes hold important political status (Valadés: 1989, 475). With this reference, Valadés calls to mind the relationship between politics and religion and the existence of a stratified society in colonial Mexico. Through the use of letters in certain images, Valadés controls the meaning of his visual narrative. Issues of control are hallmarks of the colonial situation. In spatial organization of this particular illustration, Valadés delineates a high concentration of figures when illustrating the crowd of Christians and depicts both men and women interspersed in the crowd. Most of the audience looks intently at the friar except for an unlikely individual. Behind the elaborately styled pulpit, fit with a fierce, animalistic base, Valadés demonstrates a sense of humor as a sleepy friar, presented in a thinking-man position, holds an hour glass, perhaps referencing the lengthy sermon.

The effort to control meaning permeates the work of Valadés. The ownership of knowledge and autonomy over interpretation are significant aspects of colonial efforts, consciously or unconsciously, at times Valadés appears to mimic the power structure of the Spanish colonists in the Americas in the construction of his images and text. Other illustrations from *Retórica Cristiana* that address the use of images as education tools by the friars include an image of the human mind which accompanies a discussion of the art of memory. For Valadés, units of memorization included techniques such as alliteration. While scholars have given some attention to Valadés' alphabet, along with his discussion of this method, Valadés mentions repetition of common words that begin with the same letter as a way in which to teach Spanish. For example, for the letter "C," he offers the



words, *capítulo*, *códice*, and *consejo*, as guides for learning. Furthermore, he offers letter associations with names such as Antonio for letter “A” and Bartolomé for letter “B.”

Valadés expresses skepticism toward European intellectuals who focus on mathematical and philosophical issues that detract from Christianity and provides an image of a pagan philosopher in his book, in which an intellectual appears preoccupied with geometry.

Fig. 2 <<http://instructional1.calstatela.edu/bevans/Art454L-01-MapsDocsEtc/WebPage-Full.00058.html>>

On a shelf in the background of the pagan philosopher, Valadés inserts a screenfold codex either of pre-Columbian or early colonial origin. The insertion of the codex in the pagan philosopher image suggests its potentially ‘offensive’ content. This small pre-Columbian reference reiterates the contradictions that occurred in many of the Spanish friars’ intentions and subsequent cultural production.

Friars like Valadés found themselves simultaneously defending the rights of the indigenous population of the Americas and participating in a system that viewed the very same population as inferior. The codex in the pagan philosopher is not the only illustration in *Retórica Cristiana* to reference pre-Columbian culture. In fact the book includes depictions of a pre-Columbian calendar and a *teocalli* or pre-Columbian temple.

Fig. 3 <<http://instructional1.calstatela.edu/bevans/Art454L-01-MapsDocsEtc/WebPage-Full.00062.html>>

The image of the *teocalli* implies one type of spatial formation that existed before the arrival of the Spanish. In pre-Columbian cultures large-scale interior spaces meant for the public did not exist, thus the vaulted ceilings of colonial churches were new architectural approaches to the indigenous population of the Americas. People participated in ceremony, political life, and interacted socially in large outdoor communal arenas, a utilitarian approach to space that existed in both Europe and the Americas.

Before Valadés’s *teocalli*, indigenous people participate in various activities. The small figures are identified as individuals of indigenous descent due to their feather headdresses. The top of the *teocalli* presents a rounded archway that appears similar in



shape to the open-air chapels of the *conventos* built by colonial friars. Open chapels offered friars the opportunity to reach a larger audience that could simply not fit into the church proper. Additionally open chapels equated nature and spiritual practice a concept familiar to a population steeped in pre-Columbian tradition.

Other images that related to pre-Columbian symbols and the question of morality include a representation of the aforementioned pre-Columbian calendar and an illustration that references the sanctity of marriage.

Fig. 4 <<http://instructional1.calstatela.edu/bevans/Art454L-01-MapsDocsEtc/WebPage-Full.00061.html>>

Fig. 5 <<http://instructional1.calstatela.edu/bevans/Art454L-01-MapsDocsEtc/WebPage-Full.00069.html>>

Many pre-Columbian cultures operated under a complex calendric system that included a ritual calendar and solar year. Typically the Mexica followed a 260 day calendar simultaneously with a 365 day calendar. It is probably that the 260 day calendar referenced the time at which a woman was pregnant. The conception of time and the recording of time was a complex negotiation in the early sixteenth century. In addressing marriage, Valadés represents a moral lesson. On the trees depicted in the top half of the composition, a scene of matrimony occurs; however, in the lower half of the image, a man and woman are punished for their acts of infidelity. Women point bows and arrows at the man, while men hurl rocks at the woman, emphasizing gender distinction as opposite genders punish one another. The women who admonish the man appear in a style that is typical of early sixteenth-century representations of Mexica women.² Both the hair style and the long *huipil* coupled with a long skirt inform the viewer that Valadés depicts indigenous women. Sex outside of marriage was considered a grave offense during the colonial period as evident from court records from the time that document the prosecution of adulterers.

² An example of this style of representation of Mexica women occurs in the *Codex Mendoza*, 1541-1542.



Like many other observers of the sixteenth century, Valadés does not ignore the cultural practices of the native population. Franciscan friar Bernardino de Sahagún of New Spain hired *tlacuilos* or indigenous scribes to document art forms, including featherworking, in the *Codex Florentino* in approximately 1579 and Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala of Peru describes the Inca *quipu*, a recording device made of threads, in *New Chronicle and Good Government* from approximately 1615. Valadés's depictions of the codex, the calendar, and the *teocalli*, among other native representations, remind viewers that he was well aware of pre-Columbian tradition and the continued presence of these traditions in sixteenth-century life. One can only imagine the blending of cultures in New Spain must have been difficult for friars to completely understand. He expresses positive opinions regarding the indigenous population; for example, he praises the indigenous converts over those who converted from Islam to Christianity (Valadés, 1989:421) and during his time as a missionary in colonial Mexico, Valadés recounts that he heard many confessions from indigenous people and praises them for their participation in admitting their sins and the humility and reverence they demonstrated at the hour of communion (Valadés, 1989:427). However, he certainly viewed himself as separate from this populace. Moreover, in his text Valadés praises a heroic Hernán Cortés, emphasizing the *conquistador's* efforts in forbidding the practice of native priests, the destruction of ancient temples, and the eradication of the practice of human sacrifice (Valadés, 1989: 414).

It may be argued that before the arrival of the Spanish the *teocalli*, seen earlier in this essay, represents the most significant structure of the built environment. Similarly, the *convento* complex may be the most significant type of architecture in sixteenth-century Mexico. Valadés recognized the importance of the *convento* and depicted the courtyard with attention to detail. Often referred to as *Plan for the Ideal Atrio*, this illustration remains the most highly reproduced image from *Retórica Christiana*.³

Fig. 6 <<http://instructional1.calstatela.edu/bevans/Art454L-01-MapsDocsEtc/WebPage-Full.00066.html>>

³ Valadés does not apply this title to the image, but subsequently scholars have applied this title to image.



Valadés's image of the monastery courtyard reoccurs frequently in contemporary publications, often evoked as an illustrative map of the *convento* complex; however, the illustration is much more than that. It represents a symbolic rendering of the Franciscan mission in the Americas and presents the rites and rituals of this sacred space. The image offers viewers a structured diagram of the activities that occurred in *convento* courtyards. This confined space presents an atmosphere appropriate for evangelizing the indigenous population through performance. Valadés writes that the courtyards of colonial Mexico were filled frequently with abundant converts and rites such as confession and marriage were performed frequently (Valadés, 1989:475). While the illustration may be generally modeled after a Franciscan *convento* in Mexico City, Valadés offers the image as an idealized framework for the uniformity emphasized in *convento* construction: the four *posas*, the centrally located church, and the structured landscaping.

In this specific image, Valadés presents twelve Franciscan friars processing through the courtyard space, referencing the famous apostolic twelve who arrived in 1524 from Spain as a not so subtle symbolic gesture to officially mark the commencement of evangelization in the Americas. Valadés represents the Twelve here to remind viewers of an earlier period of colonization, when the Franciscans were new to the Americas. The image is a metaphor for the way in which evangelization should occur. By covering each aspect of the courtyard with different religious activities, Valadés illustrates an idealized version of the friar's performances and their relationship to colonial space. The mapping of Mexico occurred readily in the sixteenth-century. At the center of the church located in the courtyard, Valadés represents the Christian symbol of a dove, which evokes purity and peace and frequently is depicted in art to symbolize the Holy Spirit.

The act of processing through the courtyard was a common activity during the colonial period. The earliest Franciscans recognized the indigenous population's interest in outdoor celebrations with elaborate decoration infused with drama. They utilized the outdoor space to accommodate large crowds, but also as an attempt to incorporate pre-Columbian spiritual practice with Christianity. *Cantadores* or singers appear in the upper right corner of the composition. Valadés explains that those who pursued the profession



of singers were faithful delegates who relayed information on behalf of the clergy (Valadés, 1989:425). The *posas* were utilized as small chapels for prayer and religious activity, but also as part of the religious pageantry of the friars. Valadés states that Christian instruction occurred in the *posas* and the people were separated by gender and age (Valadés, 1989:475). In this image letters again appear in the visual representation that correspond to the textual description. In the upper right hand corner an image of Pedro de Gante, pointing to a series of images for instruction, is located next to a letter P. In the text the letter P provides information regarding his piety, devotion, and ability to teach the arts (Valadés, 1989:497). Interestingly the dome-like roofs of the *posas* depicted in Valadés' illustrations are unlike any actual *posas* built in New Spain. This fact further emphasizes the illustration as a metaphor to the Christian mission as opposed to an actual physical space.

Valadés understood the importance of space in the colonial situation, specifically in regards to the *convento* courtyard. Separated from the community at large and different from pre-Columbian and European notions of contested space, the sixteenth-century courtyard altered the Mexican landscape. Engaging with the terms of space and performance in analyzing this illustration provides us with tools of interpretation to dissect each aspect of the built environment and cultural activities depicted.

Space and performance remain significant concepts that may be applied to myriad situations and cultural artifacts from the colonial period. They are abstract ideas that contract and expand to fit a given situation or work of art. Each concept appears so frequently in recent colonial scholarship, the notion that their meaning may become empty is easy to insinuate; however, as with this examination of Diego Valadés' work they can be viewed as a way to enhance meaning and offer clarity to the complexities of the colonial context of the Americas and specifically the Christian mission in colonial Mexico. Here, the concepts of space and performance have been suggested as prototypical colonial ideas. Using his artistic and literary talents, Valadés created a work combining image and text that shows viewers aspect of the Franciscan mission and tells readers a certain viewpoint of the sixteenth-century Franciscan mission; a meaningful



way to understand Valadés's project is found through the analytical tools of space and performance.

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