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MANUSCRIPT GUIDELINES FOR THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM JOURNAL

Founded in 1968, the *Metropolitan Museum Journal* is a double-anonymous, peer-reviewed scholarly journal published annually that features original research on the history, interpretation, conservation, and scientific examination of works of art in the Museum's collection. Its range encompasses the diversity of artistic practice from antiquity to the present day. The *Journal* encourages contributions offering critical and innovative approaches that will further our understanding of works of art.

The *Journal* publishes **articles** and **research notes**. All texts must take works of art in the collection as the point of departure. **Articles** contribute extensive and thoroughly argued scholarship, whereas **research notes** are often smaller in scope, focusing on a specific aspect of new research or presenting a significant finding from technical analysis. The maximum length for articles is 8,000 words (including endnotes) and 10–12 images, and for research notes 4,000 words with 4–6 images. Authors may consult previous volumes of the *Journal* as they prepare submissions: www.metmuseum.org/art/metpublications. The *Journal* does not accept papers that have been previously published elsewhere, nor does it accept translations of such works. Submissions should be emailed to journalsubmissions@metmuseum.org.

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ABBREVIATIONS

MMA The Metropolitan Museum of Art
MMAB *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*
MMJ *Metropolitan Museum Journal*

Height precedes width and then depth in dimensions cited.

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Witnessing Ingenuity: Lacquerware from Michoacán for the Vicereine of New Spain

RONDA KASL

Today there flourishes a celebrated painter, an Indian nobleman, named don José Manuel de la Cerda, who has greatly perfected this skill, such that it is finer and more lustrous than the lacquer of China. I saw a dozen large trays made of ash wood that he was painting for the most excellent lady, the marquesa de Cruillas, Vicereine of Mexico, which are worthy of a person of such elevated character.¹

—Francisco de Ajofrín, 1764

In an often-cited travel diary entry, the Capuchin alms collector Francisco de Ajofrín recorded the name of a celebrated lacquer painter, José Manuel de la Cerda, and identified the vicereine of New Spain as his patroness.² The artist, who worked in the city of Pátzcuaro in west-central Mexico, has been connected with a handful of surviving works, three of which bear his signature. One of them is a newly discovered tray (*batea*), now in The Metropolitan Museum of Art (fig. 1), while another in



fig. 1 José Manuel de la Cerda (Purépecha, Mexico, mid-18th century). Tray (*batea*) with Turnus provoked into war by Aeneas, ca. 1764. Wood, lacquer, gold, Diam. 42 in. (106.7 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Purchase, Joseph Pulitzer Fund and Sansbury-Mills Fund, 2020 (2020.321)



fig. 2 José Manuel de la Cerda. Tray (*batea*) with the coat of arms of María Josefa de Acuña y Prado, marquesa de Cruillas, vicereine of New Spain. Wood, painted lacquer, gold, Diam. 42½ in. (107 cm). Museo de América, Madrid

fig. 3 Unknown painter.
Portraits of Mateo and
Antonio de la Cerda,
Caciques of Pátzcuaro,
Founders of the Church
of Cosamaluapan.
Private collection

the Museo de América, Madrid, displays the vicereine's long-unidentified coat of arms (fig. 2).³ Both *bateas* have identical dimensions and may have been among the twelve works seen by Ajofrín when he passed through Pátzcuaro in 1764. The friar's eyewitness account, excerpted from a lengthy diary he claimed to have written for his personal use, was purportedly "a simple report of what he discovered" from 1763 to 1766, as he traversed much of New Spain by foot. The scarcity of written evidence documenting lacquerware made in the viceroyalty may explain the uncritical repetition of Ajofrín's assertions by modern scholars who routinely cite the painter's fame, the high regard for his work, and its resemblance to Chinese lacquer. The validity of these claims is corroborated by additional period witnesses, both real and fictional, even though none can be considered wholly objective or unbiased. Renewed consideration of these sources suggests that their importance lies not only in what writers witnessed and reported but also in what their descriptions reveal about the visual and material properties of lacquerware that were most valued by their contemporaries. The same sources also record the perceptions and attitudes of observers regarding the skill and ingenuity of the Indigenous artisans who traditionally made these objects.



A CELEBRATED PAINTER AND INDIAN NOBLEMAN

The Spanish surname of Cerda (or Zerda) was common among the Tarascan (Purépecha) nobility of Michoacán and it was shared by a number of artists active in Pátzcuaro and its environs.⁴ Juan Bautista de la Cerda, a featherworker (*plumajero*), is documented there in the early 1590s,⁵ and multiple generations of sculptors who specialized in sacred images molded from cornstalk paste (*caña de maíz*) have been identified, beginning in the sixteenth century.⁶ Works by the "Cerdas," sculptors named in Franciscan and Augustinian chronicles of Michoacán and neighboring Jalisco, are lauded for their lifelikeness and beauty, as well as their capacity to effect miracles. Writing in 1639, the Franciscan chronicler fray Alonso de la Rea declared that the fineness (*primor*) of works by the Cerdas was "valued in all of Europe before it was extolled in this humble history."⁷ Subsequent accounts enumerate miracle-working cult images and relate their origin stories, naming the Spanish-born sculptor Matías de la Cerda and his mestizo (mixed race) son, Luis de la Cerda, as the artists who made them.⁸ Neither Matías nor Luis de la Cerda is named in sources that predate the chronicles of the mid-seventeenth century, but so-called "Cristos de Michoacán" are documented in Spain as early as the 1530s and a considerable number are still preserved there.⁹ The renown of such works, which derived from their status as cult images with the capacity to perform miracles as well as the knowledge that they were esteemed in Europe, was historiographically linked to the Cerda surname and may have conditioned Ajofrín's recognition of José Manuel de la Cerda's fame.

Another father and son, Mateo and Antonio de la Cerda, were active as artists in Pátzcuaro and nearby Valladolid in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Their patronage of the Valladolid sanctuary of Our Lady of Cosamaluapan (Nuestra Señora de Cosamaluapan), founded by Mateo in 1680, is commemorated in a double portrait (fig. 3). Mateo displays a document that identifies the pair as "Indios Caciques" (Indian Nobles) of the city of Pátzcuaro.¹⁰ The two men, who are identifiable as Native by the length and cut of their hair, wear European-style dress. Antonio carries a small image of the Virgin of Cosamaluapan and appears to hold a staff (*vara*), representing the authority of a municipal office.¹¹

About the middle of the eighteenth century, Juan and Manuel de la Cerda, two painters who may have been brothers, also worked in and around Pátzcuaro. Signed works by Juan de la Cerda include the painting *Trinity and Souls in Purgatory*, dated 1755, in the Templo

fig. 4 José Manuel de la Cerda. Cabinet on stand, ca. 1760. Wood, painted lacquer, gold, 61 × 40³/₁₆ × 24 in. (155 × 102 × 61 cm). The Hispanic Society Museum and Library, New York (LS1642)

de la Soledad, Tzintzuntzan, and a portrait of Francisco de Lerín in the basilica of Nuestra Señora de la Salud, Pátzcuaro.¹² Manuel de la Cerda signed and dated a portrait of Bishop Vasco de Quiroga in 1755 (also in the basilica de la Salud) and, in 1760, a painting of the Virgin of Guadalupe in the Templo de Santiago Apóstol, Tupátaro.¹³ Manuel de la Cerda is probably the same artist Francisco de Ajofrín called “José Manuel de la Cerda” and praised as a “celebrated painter” in 1764. In this regard, it is significant that lacquerware bearing the signature “Manuel de la Zerda” features ornamentation executed in paint, not lacquer.

Three pieces of lacquerware signed by Manuel de la Cerda are known, including a writing cabinet painted with military sieges and skirmishes between European and Muslim cavalymen (in the Hispanic Society Museum and Library, New York; fig. 4),¹⁴ a large *batea* emblazoned with the coat of arms of the marquesa de Cruillas (in the Museo de América, Madrid; fig. 2),¹⁵ and a *batea* that features a central medallion with a galleon at harbor (in a private collection; fig. 5).¹⁶ Unsigned but securely attributed works include *bateas* that depict the story of Arachne in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (fig. 6) and scenes from Virgil’s *Aeneid*, now in



fig. 5 José Manuel de la Cerda. Tray (*batea*) with a galleon, ca. 1764. Wood, painted lacquer, gold, Diam. 36½ in. (92.5 cm). Private collection



The Metropolitan Museum of Art (fig. 1). These works share a distinct decorative style marked by the pronounced influence of imported Japanese *maki-e* lacquerware, which is distinguished by the extensive use of gold on a glossy black ground. The Spanish word for lacquer, *maque*, derives from the name for this Japanese process.¹⁷ Many of the motifs—willows, flowering trees, pagodas—likewise recall Asian sources, while others point to an awareness of European chinoiserie.¹⁸ The materials used to create the lustrous jet-black grounds that characterize these works are, however, unrelated to East Asian lacquer. *Aje* fat and chia oils, mineral clays, and colorants were combined to create the “lacquer” of

New Spanish works, which were then painted with figures and ornamentation in the style of East Asian lacquerware and European imitations of it.¹⁹ Some of the same works also show a notable familiarity with subjects drawn from classical sources.²⁰ The *bateas* in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and The Met depict scenes from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* and Virgil’s *Aeneid*, respectively, while the table beneath the writing cabinet in the Hispanic Society displays an emblem-like vignette of Pegasus on the Hippocrene fountain. Well suited for the decoration of a writing cabinet, this image depicts the waters of poetic inspiration springing from the rocky heights of Mount Helicon, where the winged horse



fig. 6 José Manuel de la Cerda. Tray (*batea*), ca. 1760. Wood, painted lacquer, gold, Diam. 34½ in. (87.6 cm). Los Angeles County Museum of Art, purchased with funds provided by the Bernard and Edith Lewin Collection of Mexican Art Deaccession Fund (inv. M.2010.6)

fig. 7 Detail of tray (*batea*) with the coat of arms of María Josefa de Acuña y Prado, marquesa de Cruillas, vicereine of New Spain (fig. 2)

strikes the ground with his hooves.²¹ Pegasus is accompanied by trophies representing the arts, including an array of musical instruments, a palette and paintbrushes, books inscribed with numbers and musical notation, and a sculpted figurine.

In describing his stopover in Pátzcuaro, Francisco de Ajofrín thought it worthwhile not only to identify the painter José Manuel de la Cerda by name, using the honorific prefix “don,” but also to record that he was an “Indian nobleman” (*indio noble*). This is a detail of some consequence, even though, by the mid-1760s, the political authority of the local Indigenous nobility had been greatly diminished. As the descendant of one of the principal Purépecha families, José Manuel de la Cerda would have enjoyed elevated social status as well as privileges recognized by the Spanish Crown.²² By invoking both the artist’s fame and his nobility, Ajofrín suggests that the *bateas* he had seen and declared worthy of the vicereine were suitable not only because of De la Cerda’s skill and renown but also because of his lineage. In this respect, the painter’s audacity in placing his signature just beneath the marquesa’s coat of arms, within the same central medallion, may be meaningful (fig. 7).

A PERSON OF ELEVATED CHARACTER

María Josefa de Acuña y Prado (1725–1779) was the youngest child of Juan Manuel de Acuña, III marqués de Escalona (1695–1742), and María Micaela de Prado (1709–1755), VII condesa de Obedos. Her great-uncle, Juan Vázquez de Acuña y Bejarano (1658–1734), I marqués de Casa Fuerte, was the thirty-seventh viceroy of New Spain (1722–34). In 1749, in the oratory of the Escalona palace in Madrid, María Josefa married the Valencian nobleman Joaquín Manuel de Montserrat y Cruillas (1700–1771), an accomplished military commander who was twenty-five years her senior.²³ He was a veteran of Spain’s Italian campaigns in support of the patrimonial claims of the future king Charles III, who rewarded him with the hereditary title of marqués de Cruillas in 1735 and made him viceroy of New Spain in 1760, the first to be named to that post by the new king. In late June, the newly appointed viceroy, his family, and an entourage numbering more than forty passengers departed for New Spain from the port of Cádiz.²⁴ Accompanied by the vicereine, the new viceroy made his public entry into Mexico City on January 25, 1761, framed by a seventy-six-foot-tall triumphal arch decorated with paintings that hailed him as a second Hercules and celebrated his heroism in battle.²⁵ His official portrait (fig. 8), also dated 1761, was made by Pedro Martínez, the same artist who created the paintings that decorated the triumphal arch.²⁶

“The magnificence, authority and grandeur of a Viceroy is imponderable,” wrote fray Francisco de Ajofrín, asserting further that “only someone who has seen it and examined it close by can believe it.”²⁷ The Spanish Capuchin friar had ample occasion to observe



fig. 8 Pedro Martínez (Mexico, act. mid-18th century). Portrait of Joaquín de Montserrat y Cruillas, Viceroy of New Spain, 1761. Oil on canvas, 40 × 31¼ in. (101.5 × 80.6 cm). Museo Nacional de Historia, Castillo de Chapultepec, Mexico City

the viceregal court up close during his long sojourn in New Spain. He had been sent to the viceroyalty under the auspices of the Vatican's Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith, known as the Propaganda Fide, to collect alms in support of its Tibet mission (in reality, the evangelization of Nepal and northern India). In a complicated arrangement with the Propaganda, fray Francisco's undertaking was linked to the repayment of a debt owed by the Spanish Crown to Giovanni Domenico Spinola. In 1734, Spinola's descendants donated the outstanding debt to the Propaganda Fide, which in turn dedicated it to the support of its Tibet mission. In 1738, the Spanish king Philip V transferred responsibility for repayment of the debt to the government of New Spain and granted permission for the Propaganda to send Capuchin friars to the viceroyalty to collect alms to support the same mission.²⁸ With the expulsion of the Capuchins from Tibet in 1745, authorities in Rome largely lost interest in financing the mission, if not in recovering the debt, much of which was actually used to fund other activities.

Soon after his arrival in Mexico City in late December 1763, Francisco de Ajofrín presented himself to the viceroy and secured his support for the alms-collecting mission. Ajofrín also earned the viceroy's personal favor, which included an invitation to reside in the palace (which he declined) and culminated in his service as chaplain during the family's return voyage to Spain in summer 1767.²⁹ The friar's relationship with the viceroy and his family is relevant to the current analysis because it supports the reliability of his account of the vicereine's patronage of José Manuel de la Cerda and her commission of twelve large *bateas* from him. It was more than hearsay; Ajofrín was in a position to have firsthand knowledge of the matter.

Another Franciscan author, José Joaquín Granados y Gálvez (1734–1794), also claimed direct knowledge of the vicereine's appreciation for Mexican lacquer. In his *Tardes Americanas* (1778), a work conceived as a fictional dialogue between an "Indian" and a "Spaniard," the latter claims that he has seen and admired "some sewing boxes, a folding screen, and other lacquered pieces" belonging to the vicereine, which "after attracting admiration in New Spain, filled the Old one with wonderment." Further, he cites multiple affirmations by the marquesses that they valued the lacquerware "more than all the precious objects they possessed and had acquired at great expense."³⁰ It should be noted that the Spaniard's remarks were made in the context of the book's Fourth Afternoon (*Tarde Cuarta*) in which he and the Indian debate the greatness of the Mesoamerican past and present. Specifically, the works



were cited as evidence in support of the Indian's claims regarding the astonishing and inimitable qualities of Tarascan (Purépecha) lacquerware. Even though this previously overlooked literary representation of the vicereine's enthusiasm for New Spanish lacquer does not share the descriptive aims of Ajofrín's travel diary, it nonetheless corroborates the friar's account of her patronage of José Manuel de la Cerda. Moreover, it makes clear that the marquesses took the objects that adorned the royal palace in Mexico City to Madrid when they returned to Spain in 1767. If Granados y Gálvez is to be believed, their display in their palace on Madrid's calle Ancha de San Bernardo was cause for both admiration and astonishment.³¹ This would have been consistent with the practice of other former viceroys and colonial officials for whom it was a mark of distinction to furnish their peninsular residences with luxuries and curiosities acquired in America.³² It is noteworthy that the marquesses also collected objects from China, including two ivory pagodas, three made of mother-of-pearl, and four large porcelain jars, all of which were probably acquired during their residence in New Spain.

Granados y Gálvez was by no means the first to cite the transatlantic demand for and appreciation of New Spanish lacquer as tangible evidence of the skills of Tarascan (Purépecha) artisans. His argument echoes that of the Augustinian chronicler fray Matías de Escobar, who had earlier in the century singled out

lacquerware made in the town of Peribán for its renown: “not content to be sought after in all of New Spain for their curiosity, they went on to be celebrated in Spain.”³³ The fame of such works was clearly dependent upon their appreciation beyond the region where they were produced. It was not merely a question of local acclaim, but rather, recognition and appreciation by Spanish elites in the capital and abroad. Similarly, for Ajofrín, some measure of José Manuel de la Cerda’s celebrity was likely inferred by his knowledge of the vicereine’s patronage.

ONE DOZEN LARGE BATEAS

It is highly likely that one of the dozen large *bateas* Francisco de Ajofrín saw in Pátzcuaro was the tray displaying the vicereine’s coat of arms, now in the Museo de América, Madrid (fig. 2). The elements of the shield, which belong to María Josefa de Acuña y Prado, are supplemented with a coronet that signifies her status as a marchioness and a heraldic panoply of flags, drums, and weapons.³⁴ The *batea* entered the collection of the Madrid museum from the Museo Arqueológico de Toledo, having previously formed part of the Borbón-Lorenzana collection. Because of its provenance, it has been argued that Francisco Antonio de Lorenzana, archbishop of Mexico (1766–72), and later archbishop of Toledo (1772–1800), received it as a gift while in Mexico. According to this hypothesis, he would have taken it with him on his return to Spain and incorporated it into the cabinet of antiquities or natural history associated with the library he established in the archbishop’s palace in Toledo in 1773.³⁵ While Cardinal Lorenzana could have acquired the *batea* as a gift while in New Spain, it is more likely that he obtained it from the public sale of the marquesa’s estate in 1779, at a time when he was actively seeking objects for his new library.³⁶

fig. 9 Detail of tray (*batea*) with the coat of arms of María Josefa de Acuña y Prado, marquesa de Cruillas, vicereine of New Spain, showing an encounter between a Spanish nobleman and Indigenous men (fig. 2)

fig. 10 Detail of tray (*batea*) with the coat of arms of María Josefa de Acuña y Prado, marquesa de Cruillas, vicereine of New Spain, showing women at a fountain (fig. 2)

fig. 11 Detail of tray (*batea*) with the coat of arms of María Josefa de Acuña y Prado, marquesa de Cruillas, vicereine of New Spain, showing Indigenous hunters (fig. 2)

The central and visually dominant presence of the coat of arms on the Madrid *batea* has tended to overshadow other details of its profuse ornamentation. The heraldic device is encircled by a series of eye-catching vignettes, framed by alternating willow and camellia trees. The little scenes are populated by Indigenous and European elites, both men and women whose interactions, whether casual or formal, reflect a contemporary sensibility that conceived of civilization as a process that was fundamentally concerned with social comportment.³⁷ One scene depicts an encounter between a Spanish nobleman and three Indigenous principals or caciques (fig. 9). In what appears to be a formal act, the Spaniard, who wears military-style attire, has dismounted his horse to receive or be received by a Native delegation, literally on equal footing. Other scenes pair Spanish and Indigenous women, who are distinguished by the types of garments they wear and who interact more casually at fountains and in parklike settings (fig. 10). The local style of dress (*ropa de la tierra*) worn by the Indigenous women anchors the vignettes in the daily life of New Spain, if not in that of a particular place. These scenes of recreation and mediation contrast with others in which Indigenous men are shown as seminude hunters and warriors (fig. 11). The killing of a stag by three agile hunters is likely to have been read as a metaphor for their prowess in warfare. The seemingly contradictory representations of and attitudes toward Indigenous subjects were commonplace at the time, as was the conception of Native people in terms of convenient dichotomies such as civilization/barbarism.³⁸ In this case, it is notable that the painter who expressed these tendencies was José Manuel de la Cerda, himself an Indigenous man and a member of the Purépecha elite.

Unfortunately, Francisco de Ajofrín’s eyewitness account gives no indication of what was depicted on





fig. 12 Detail of tray (*batea*) with Turnus provoked into war by Aeneas (fig. 1)

any of the twelve *bateas* he saw in Pátzcuaro. If the Madrid *batea* was among them, as it probably was, it must have been paired with another armorial one (now lost) that displayed the coat of arms of the marqués de Cruillas. A case can also be made that the *batea* preserved in The Met (fig. 1) was originally part of the set. It is the same size as the Madrid *batea* and employs the same decorative vocabulary of willows and flowering trees framing figural vignettes encircling a central medallion, although its design is somewhat more complex and it incorporates a greater number of secondary scenes.³⁹ The central medallion of the New York *batea*, which depicts an episode from Virgil's *Aeneid*, conforms with Ajofrín's judgment that the *bateas* he saw in Pátzcuaro were worthy of the vicereine's high status. The scene, which features the Trojan hero Aeneas's depraved antagonist, Turnus, is unlikely to have been conceived as an independent subject and almost certainly formed part of a set or series that included episodes that emphasized the noble character of Aeneas.

The *batea* in The Met features two related scenes from book 9 of the *Aeneid* encircled by the following inscription: *TURNUS AENEAS PROVOCA A LA GUERA* [*sic*] (Turnus provoked into war by Aeneas) (fig. 12). Turnus is shown astride a charging white horse outside

the walls of a Trojan fortress, whose defenders refuse to engage him in battle. The flag and lances of the Trojans protrude above its battlements; Aeneas is not present. Turnus, the embodiment of irrational furor, was likened by Virgil to a raging wolf: "So wildly Turnus, / scanning the camp and ramparts, flares in anger, / brute resentment sears him to the bone."⁴⁰ In response to the Trojan's refusal to fight, Turnus, who brandishes a flaming torch, would set fire to the Trojan ships, two of which can be seen in the waters behind him. This act of rage will assure Aeneas's Roman destiny: his ships destroyed; his years of wandering the Mediterranean come to an end in Italy. The secondary scene below shows another rarely depicted subject: the nighttime foray of the Trojan companions Nisus and Euryalus. The armed men on horseback, accompanied by foot soldiers with lances, converge on a pair of camp tents and their drunken, sleeping occupants. The bloody ambush against Turnus's encampment would end in tragedy for the Trojan pair. Encircling the episodes from the *Aeneid* is a wide band of ornamentation containing eight vignettes framed by willows and camellia trees that feature clashes between armed men. While the mythological warriors in the central scene wear suits of armor, the figures that populate the vignettes that surround it wear military-style dress of the mid-eighteenth century. Neither the subject matter nor the location of the skirmishes is identifiable. Although the vegetation and some of the buildings recall Asia, the scenes constitute a repertoire of visual motifs that is primarily decorative and does not appear to correspond to actual places.

Since the set to which the *batea* in The Met must have once belonged has not been preserved intact, it is all but impossible to propose anything more than a generalized reading of its program or argument. Allegorical treatment of the *Aeneid* was prevalent in Spanish court contexts, the best-known contemporaneous example being Tiepolo's ceiling for the Guard Room of the Royal Palace in Madrid, which was finished by 1766.⁴¹ As a foundational myth, the *Aeneid* had long served Spanish monarchs as an instrument of political and genealogical legitimation. It also served to legitimize and celebrate the Spanish conquest of Mexico and was invoked from the outset as a narrative model.⁴² In a letter to Emperor Charles V, Hernán Cortés famously cited the destruction of Aeneas's ships and the subsequent founding of Rome in connection with the alleged burning of his own fleet to prevent the retreat of his army at the beginning of the conquest of Mexico, calling it "a Trojan deed."⁴³

In New Spain, the heroic deeds of Aeneas were presented in conjunction with the public entry of more than one viceroy into Mexico City. Upon his entry into the capital in 1663, Antonio Sebastián de Toledo, marqués de Mancera, was proclaimed the “true Aeneas,” and his virtues were compared to those of the Trojan hero in the pictorial program of a monumental triumphal arch conceived by the poet Alonso Ramírez de Vargas.⁴⁴ Nearly a century later, in 1756, the marqués de Cruillas’s immediate predecessor as viceroy, Agustín de Ahumada, marqués de Amarillas, was hailed as the “Spanish Aeneas” upon his entry into Mexico City.⁴⁵ If, as appears likely, the *Aeneid batea* and the hypothetical set to which it once belonged were destined for display in the viceregal palace, it would be appropriate to regard them in a similar light, as the presentation of a model of rulership, distinguished by prudence and *pietas* as well as heroism.

Political allegories aside, the story of Aeneas’s Mediterranean odyssey readily lent itself to comparison with the long, often treacherous sea voyage from Spain to America and was frequently invoked by panegyrists and chroniclers alike. Not only was it habitually cited in connection with the Atlantic crossings of new viceroys, but it was also compared to other expeditions and arrivals by sea, beginning with that of Hernán Cortés in 1519. More than two centuries later, Matías de Escobar likened the passage of the first Spanish Augustinian friars to America to the journey of Aeneas in his *Americana Thebaida* (1729).⁴⁶ The same author related the peregrinations of the Trojans to the supposed migration of the Tarascan people from Asia via the mythical Strait of Anián, comparing the founding of Tzintzuntzan to that of Troy.⁴⁷

MORE LUSTROUS THAN THE LACQUER OF CHINA

The production of works like the *Aeneid batea* in New Spain was stimulated by the presence of and demand for lacquer imported from China and Japan. Along with other Asian luxury goods, it was shipped via the Manila galleons to Acapulco, then dispersed and sold in the viceroyalty and beyond. The enormous demand for East Asian lacquer in Spanish America encouraged the local production of works that used pre-Hispanic techniques and local materials to achieve visual effects comparable to those admired in imported lacquer. The most important centers of production were located in Michoacán, where local masters and workshops in Pátzcuaro, Peribán, and Uruapan developed distinctive lacquer techniques and styles of painting. Lacquerware produced in Pátzcuaro by José Manuel de la Cerda and

his workshop reveals the most pronounced influence of Asian imports. Contemporary observers like Francisco de Ajofrín frequently declared the superiority of lacquerware made by Indigenous artisans in Michoacán to “Chinese” works, making hyperbolic claims that offer characterizations of the visual and material properties that were most valued.⁴⁸ Ajofrín called the works of José Manuel de la Cerda “finer and more lustrous” than Chinese lacquer, while he neglects to characterize the artist’s Asian-inspired painting style.⁴⁹ In a similar vein, the fictional Indian of Granados y Gálvez’s *Tardes Americanas* claimed that the “boldness and durability” of Peribán lacquer had nothing to be envious of in comparison with the most celebrated works of China. Declaring it “inimitable,” the Indian affirmed that “even the most skilled Spaniards could not approximate the crudest piece.”⁵⁰ Matías de Escobar, who likewise maintained that the Spanish had not been able to imitate it, declared Tarascan lacquer to be finer than ebony, unequaled by European jet, and so black that it turned the surfaces of the objects it covered into mirrors.⁵¹ Both Escobar and Granados y Gálvez stressed its hardness and permanence, contending that the colors became one with the wood itself.⁵²

The writings of clerical elites in New Spain, especially those who belonged to monastic orders (like Rea, Escobar, Ajofrín, and Granados y Gálvez), consistently called attention to the skill of Purépecha artisans, chronicling their accomplishments in diverse media. The recurring trope of Indigenous ingenuity (*ingenio*) is not far beneath the surface of many early accounts, in which the artistic capability of Native people, whether innate or learned, is taken as proof of their capacity to receive the gospel and be incorporated into a Christian community.⁵³ One of the earliest and clearest expressions of this position is found in the *Memoriales* (1536–43) of fray Toribio de Benavente, known as Motolinía. One of the first Franciscans to arrive in Mexico, Motolinía devoted a chapter of his Mesoamerican history to the ingenuity and ability (*buen ingenio y grande habilidad*) of Indigenous peoples who quickly mastered manual skills through observation alone.⁵⁴ Hernán Cortés, writing in 1520, had also reported that Indigenous artisans made things according to his designs and perfectly copied “images, crucifixes, medals, jewels, and necklaces, and other things of ours” that he gave them.⁵⁵

Seventeenth-century chroniclers of Michoacán, like fray Alonso de la Rea, singled out Tarascan (Purépecha) artisans not just for their ability to make copies and master European skills but for the comprehensiveness

of their ingenuity.⁵⁶ Diego Basalenque, an Augustinian friar, declared that “in general the ingenuity of the Tarascan exceeds that of Indians of other provinces.”⁵⁷ Far from being considered mere copyists and imitators, they were celebrated as inventors of unheard-of arts such as lightweight sculpture made from cornstalk paste (*caña de maíz*), images and adornments made from feathers, and an inimitable type of lacquer that was applied to gourds, wooden objects, and furniture. It is commonplace, especially in eighteenth-century accounts, to attribute to Indigenous artisans a profound knowledge of natural materials that was not discoverable by Europeans. Granados y Gálvez’s fictional Indian, citing the authority of reliable witnesses, avowed that the lacquer artists used “a variety of plants, entirely hidden from the knowledge of the most astute and curious.”⁵⁸ According to Matías de Escobar, the black lacquer of Peribán was achieved with “nothing more than a little powdered earth” sprinkled on oil.⁵⁹ His claim that Spaniards had not yet been able to imitate it is corroborated by the painter-theorist Antonio Palomino, who, despite comprehending the process by which what he called “inlaid painting” (*pintura embutida*) was made, had only a vague grasp of the materials that were used, stating that it was finished with “very strong varnishes they make from various fruits, gums, and worms from certain trees.”⁶⁰

Lacquer, which had traditionally been applied to gourds in Michoacán, was used to decorate a variety of objects, including *bateas*, boxes of diverse kinds, folding screens, and European-style furniture. Writing in 1673, Diego Basalenque observed that Indigenous arti-

sans had learned to make “very good desks and refined things” from locally abundant wood.⁶¹ In the eighteenth century, the production of sumptuously lacquered desks like the one signed by José Manuel de la Cerda (fig. 4) gave rise to at least one notable attempt to conceptualize the phenomenon of cultural hybridity, or *mestizaje*. The lacquered desks were renowned, according to Matías de Escobar, because they made a “diphthong” of what Native artisans learned from Spanish masters and what they already knew, likening the addition of lacquer and paintings to furniture to a wood graft. The result, he asserted, was akin to “a Spanish figure (*traza*) dressed in Indian clothing.”⁶² Escobar’s analogy recognizes what is visually apparent in works like the *Aeneid* tray in The Met: that New Spanish lacquerware is an intensely mediated art, as deeply implicated in local practices as it is in global networks of commerce, empire, and evangelization.

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RONDA KASL

Curator of Latin American Art, The American Wing, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

NOTES

- 1 “Hoy florece un célebre pintor, indio noble, llamado don José Manuel de la Cerda, que ha perfeccionado mucho esta facultad, de suerte que excede en primor y lustre a los maques de la China. Vi una docena de bateas grandes de fresno que estaba pintando para la excelentísima señora Marquesa de Cruillas, Virreina de Méjico, dignas de la persona de tan elevado carácter.” Ajofrín 1958–59, 1:220.
- 2 The viceroyalty of New Spain included present-day Mexico.
- 3 Ana Zabía de la Mata (2018, 115) expressed doubt that the *batea* was among the twelve made for the marquesa de Cruillas and maintained that the coat of arms was not hers. Hugo Félix Rocha (2021, 100–101) conjectured that the coat of arms combined those of the marquesa and her husband.
- 4 López Sarrelangue 1999, 166, 240, 256, 260, 263, 272. Tarasco was the name given by the Spanish to the Purépecha people.

- 5 Ibid., 253; Paredes Martínez 1994, 336. He may be the artist responsible for a featherwork image of the Virgin of Sorrows, signed “Juan Bautista,” that belonged to Rudolph II in Prague. See Estrada de Gerlero 2004 and Stanfield-Mazzi 2021, 167.
- 6 Luft 1972; Fernández Castelló 1972; Estrada Jasso 1996, 50–55; Velarde Cruz 2009, 59–66.
- 7 “las hechuras de los Cerdas, cuyo primor en alas de la fama, llegó primero á gozar la estimacion en toda la Europa que los encarecimientos de esta humilde historia.” Rea 1882, 41.
- 8 Mota Padilla 1870, 392; Escobar 1924, 26; Tello 1945, 73; Ornelas 1962, 141–45.
- 9 Amador Marrero 2002; Amador Marrero et al. 2018; Pérez de Castro and Amador Marrero 2020.
- 10 Mateo de la Cerda holds a sheet of paper inscribed: “Retratos de Matheo de la Zerda, y Antonio de la Zerda. Indios Caziques

- dela Ciudad d. Pazquaro, y fundadores desta Iglesia de Cosamaluap.ⁿ." See López Sarrelangue 1999, 264, and González Vargas 2016.
- 11 Antonio de la Cerda was documented as a painter in Valladolid in 1708; see Velarde Cruz 2018, 217.
 - 12 Toussaint 1990, 177; Velarde Cruz 2018.
 - 13 Pullido Echeveste 2018, 179–80; Velarde Cruz 2006, 54–55.
 - 14 Martínez del Río de Redo 1969, 16, fig. 12; Bargellini 1994; Kornegay 2006. The artist's signature appears on the drop front of the cabinet: Man, de la Zerda [f]ec.
 - 15 The artist's signature appears just below the coat of arms: Ma.^l dla Zerda Paztq.^o. This work was first connected with the artist Francisco de Ajofrín called "José Manuel de la Cerda" by Castelló Yturbide and Martínez del Río de Redo 1968.
 - 16 Fernández Castelló 1972, 30–32; Urrechaga 2014, 32, 44–45. The artist's fragmentary signature appears above the galleon in the central roundel: [. . .] Zerda [. . .] Paztquaro.
 - 17 Fraga García 1997, 112–16.
 - 18 Ocaña Ruiz 2019.
 - 19 Castelló Yturbide 1981; Pérez Carrillo 1990; Acuña Castellón 2012; Acosta Ruiz 2013; Coddington 2015, 82–89. The use of chia oil as an artistic material in New Spain is the subject of an ongoing research project at The Met, led by Julie Arslanoglu (principal investigator), José Luis Lazarte, and Ronda Kasl (co-principal investigators). "A Novel Tripartite Approach to Biomolecule Analysis for the Identification of Unknown Artistic Materials Applied to the Use of Chia Oil in Art from New Spain" has been made possible in part by a major grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities: Democracy demands wisdom.
 - 20 García Sáiz and Pérez Carrillo 1986.
 - 21 On the representation and emblematic use of Pegasus in New Spain, see Tovar de Teresa 2006.
 - 22 López Sarrelangue 1999, 109–48.
 - 23 Cruilles 1880; Fernández de Béthencourt 1901, 82–83.
 - 24 "Expediente de información y licencia de pasajero a Indias de Joaquín de Montserrat, marqués de Cruillas, virrey de Nueva España (23 June 1760)," Contratación, 5503, N.2, R.17, Archivo General de Indias, Seville.
 - 25 Velázquez Cárdenas y León 1761; Chiva Beltrán 2012, 201–3.
 - 26 Rodríguez Moya 2003, 211.
 - 27 "La magnificencia, autoridad y grandeza de un Virrey es imponderable, y sólo quien lo haya visto y examinado de cerca lo podrá creer." Ajofrín 1958–59, 1:71.
 - 28 Ibid., 1:7; Lorenzen 2013.
 - 29 Ajofrín 1958–59, 1:179–80.
 - 30 "Y puedes añadir para autorizar tu dicho, que admiré y ví unas almohadillas, rodaestrado, y otras piezas maqueadas, presentas á la Exmâ. Señora Virreyna Esposa del Excmô. Señor D. Joaquin de Monserrat, Marqués de Cruillas, que despues que sirvieron de admiracion en esta Nueva España, llenaron la Antigua de ponderaciones; asegurando sus Excelencias muchas veces, que apreciaban en mas aquellos maques, que quantas alhajas de valor poseían, y pudieran adquirir á expensas de gruesas cantidades." Granados y Gálvez 1778, 117.
 - 31 The marqués de Cruillas returned to Valencia in 1771 and died there the same year; his wife remained in Madrid until her death in 1779. Fernández de Béthencourt 1901, 87.
 - 32 See Aguiló Alonso 1990; Montes González 2017; and Sigaut and García Sáiz 2017; Wattenberg García 2020, 16–17.
 - 33 "las cuales no contentas con ser de toda la Nueva España solicitadas por lo curioso, pasan a ser celebradas a España." Escobar 1924, 148.
 - 34 The same shield, along with one belonging to Joaquín de Montserrat, adorns a silver monstrance the couple gave to the parish church of Planes (Valencia). Slight variations and simplifications result from differences of scale and medium. Cots Morató and López Catalá 2008–9, 14, 149, fig. 3; cited by Félix Rocha 2021, 100–101.
 - 35 Castelló Yturbide and Martínez del Río de Redo 1968, 37; García Sáiz 1990; Curiel 1994, 171, 172. For a description of the library and cabinets of natural history and antiquities founded by Cardinal Lorenzana in Toledo, see Ponz 1787–94, 1:127–29, letter 3, paragraphs 9–11; Parro 1857, 2:577–83; and Cabello Carro 1994, 186–88, 192–93.
 - 36 The sale of ivory pagodas and other Chinese objects from the marquesa's estate is described by the naturalist Pedro Franco Dávila in a letter to José Moñino, the Count of Floridablanca (May 20, 1779); see Wattenberg García 2020, 16–17. Franco Dávila was the first director of the Real Gabinete de Historia Natural in Madrid. In the revised third edition of his *Viage de España*, Antonio Ponz declared that Lorenzana's cabinet "features many curiosities and is growing every day." Ponz 1787–94, 1:129: "El gabinete de historia natural consta ya de muchas curiosidades, y cada dia va en aumento." This description does not appear in the first two editions, published in 1772 and 1776. Ponz's remark may also refer to the incorporation of objects from the collections of the Infante Luis María de Borbón y Vallabriga and his father, Luis María de Borbón y Farnesio (brother of Carlos III) after 1785. According to Sisto Ramón Parro (1857, 2:582), Lorenzana "by one means or another, gathered a respectable number of curiosities of different kinds" ("de unas maneras y otras reunió una respetable cantidad de curiosidades de diversos géneros").
 - 37 Deacon 1996.
 - 38 Taylor 1989.
 - 39 The Met and Madrid *bateas* are unusually large, measuring 106.7 cm and 107 cm in diameter, respectively.
 - 40 *Aeneid*, book 9, lines 74–76. I have used the English translation by Robert Fagles (Virgil 2006, 391).
 - 41 Gaskell 1992.
 - 42 On the *Aeneid* in Mexico, see Río Torres-Murciano 2019 and Álvarez Hernández, Leopold, and Weiss 2019.
 - 43 "un hecho troyano." Cortés 2007, 5.
 - 44 Ramírez de Vargas 1664; Maza 1968, 97–99; Chiva Beltrán 2012, 160.
 - 45 Urrutia y Vergara 1756; Maza 1968, 200–203; Rodríguez Moya 2008, 154–57; Chiva Beltrán 2012, 196–97.
 - 46 Escobar 1924, 57.
 - 47 Ibid., 19–21.
 - 48 The designation "Chinese" was used indiscriminately to refer to objects of diverse Asian origin.
 - 49 Ajofrín 1958–59, 1:220. For the full quote, see note 1 above.
 - 50 "En el maque que dan á las maderas, tocan las líneas del asombro, y se hacen inimitables; no habiendo podido el estudio aun de los mas hábiles Españoles, asemejar ni la pieza mas basta. En esta clase maravillosamente se exceden los Indios Tarascos que pueblan los Peribanos, dándole tanta solidez y consistencia á los colores con que matizan el maque, que regularmente es negro, que igualmente se consumen con la misma madera." Granados y Gálvez 1778, 116–17.
 - 51 Escobar 1924, 147.

- 52 Ibid., 26; Granados y Gálvez 1778, 117.
- 53 Russo 2014–15.
- 54 Motolinía 1971, 394.
- 55 “Imágenes, Crucifixos, Medallas, Joyeles, y Collares, y otras muchas cosas de la nuestras, que les hize contrafacer.” Cortés 1770, 99.
- 56 Rea 1882, 37–42. Written in 1639 and first published in 1643, chapter 9 of Alonso de la Rea’s chronicle of the Franciscan province of Michoacán is titled “On the Ingenuity of the Tarascans, the eminence of their works and other things of which they were the first inventors.” Ibid., 37: “Del ingenio del Tarasco, de la eminencia en sus obras y de algunas cosas de que fueron ellos primeros inventores.”
- 57 “en general el ingenio de el Tarasco, excede al de los otros Indios de otras Provincias.” Basalenque 1886, 120.
- 58 “variedad de yerbas, escondidas enteramente a él conocimiento de los más ladinos y curiosos.” Granados y Gálvez 1778, 117.
- 59 “no es más que una poca de tierra en polvo que sobre un aceite que ellos hacen espolvorean.” Escobar 1924, 147.
- 60 “barnices muy fuertes, que hacen de varias frutas, gomas y gusanos de ciertos arboles.” Palomino 1988, 1:130–31.
- 61 “Enseñáronles la carpintería, con la facilidad de las maderas que tenían, . . . hasta hazer muy buenos escritorios y cosas pulidas.” Basalenque 1886, 119–20.
- 62 “Diéronles Maestros carpinteros por tener bastantes maderas en que ejercitarse, y aprendieron tan bien el arte, que tuvieron fama sus escritorios y consiguieron aplausos sus artezones, porque haciendo un diptongo de lo que aprendían de los maestros españoles y de lo que ellos sabían, formaban un nuevo injerto en las maderas sobre las castellanas medidas, gavetas de escritorios, cajas y escribanías, añadían ellos sus maques y sus pinturas, y hacían singular su obra, pues a un mismo tiempo lucía la española traza vestida del ropaje indiano.” Escobar 1924, 147.

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