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DEPICTIONS OF ANGELS WITH FIREARMS
IN THE ICONOGRAPHY OF THE VICEROYALTY OF PERU

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Colonialism is generally regarded as a definitely negative phenomenon based on radical social inequalities and a result of brutal conquest, frequently close to homicide. As is often the case with such clichés, this image is far too simplified and narrow-minded if not erroneous. As a matter of fact, Latin America, with its one-of-a-kind culture proves how valuable the results of bloody confrontation of two dramatically different worlds can be. One of its abundant fruits, which is the subject of this work, appeared in a very special place, the Viceroyalty of Peru that is. This administrative and political district was founded by a royal decree in 1542 and was to exist, with numerous modifications, until the end of the Spanish reign in the region in 1824. Its territory at its peak consisted of the majority of South America, excluding Portugal's domains in nowadays Basil and Spanish-held, but separately managed region of today's Venezuela. The core of the Viceroyalty of Peru was based upon the old Inca empire – it was just there, on the Andean highlands in the city of Potosí, where the world's richest silver deposits were found, and it was in Cuzco, the former Inca capital, where the region's most important cultural center emerged (Bailey, Nasatir 1969, pp. 176, 258–261, 270–272, maps 6–7).

The city is famous for hosting one of the most splendid colonial painting schools. The so-called Cuzco school was formed around the mid 17th century. It was characterised by depicting clothes in an extremely decorative manner, placing Andean landscapes in the background as well as discreetly connecting native everyday life scenes with the European Baroque art canon. Moreover, the school consisted of artists from different social levels – it was formed not only by European immigrants, bringing novelties from the metropolis, but also by indians and mestizos, throwing in local folk art and culture. This mix gave birth to an extraordinary style. Each artist working in a workshop was responsible for a different part of the painting: hands,

face, clothes, background, etc. The Cuzco pieces achieved great success as they came to be ordered not only from the most distant parts of the Viceroyalty, but also from other Spanish domains. No wonder the painting production reached manufacture, if not industrial level of organisation (Gisbert, de Mesa 1986, pp. 81–94).

The depictions of angels in a contemporary military outfit are a truly unique phenomenon in the whole Christian world, even taken into consideration their exotic provenance. The divine messengers are shown as soldiers equipped and uniformed up to the standards of the era (or at least inspired by those regulations). In fact, angels have always been regarded as defenders of the humanity against evil forces, and thereby they can be often seen depicted with arms and armor. However, these normally were of a roman-like antique fashion, especially in Renaissance and Baroque art, while celestial warriors with firearms, puffed clothes and infantry banners can't be seen at that time anywhere but in South America.

The majority of the depictions in question can be found in churches spread over the Andean highlands (*altiplano*) from the La Paz department through Oruro, Potosí in Bolivia up to Uquía in Argentina. The most famous series of arquebus armed angels is held in Calamarca, a town nearby La Paz. Other noteworthy specimens come from the towns of Peñas in La Paz, Sora-Sora and Yarvicolla in Oruro department and San Martin church in the city of Potosí (Álvarez Rodríguez 2005, p. 13). All those paintings are anonymous, although José de Mesa and Teresa Gisbert, a pair of Bolivian art historians, believe that the Calamarca group was created by José López de los Ríos. He was one of the most successful artists from the Cuzco school (in fact he was the leader of the whole team of painters as per Cuzco standards). Various similarities can be found between the discussed pieces and some wall paintings in the church in Carabuco. The latter group was doubtlessly created by de los Ríos around 1684 (Gisbert, de Mesa 1996, p. 198).

The Andean arquebusier angels stand out of the common canon in a spectacular manner. Their modern appearance can be a result of the following factors.

First of all, those depictions were addressed to native people, for whom firearms, available only to the Spanish, appeared to be especially effective, and, because of their unexplicable operation, nearly magic. Because the celestial forces couldn't be equipped with anything but the best armament possible, firearms in the hands of New World angels should not be surprising.

Secondly, during that time there was a widespread manner of using military language in alegories connected to faith (Andrzejewska, Demkowicz 2011, pp. 1087–1088). Such pieces, connecting war and sacral spheres, while

maybe not being main stream, can certainly be called noteworthy. In music, we can point out *Al campo sale Maria* or *El mas augosto campeon villacino* de batalla type songs, contemporary to our paintings and originating from the same Viceroyalty, as good examples. Both are telling about the struggle between the forces of good and evil as if it was an ordinary battle, fought with earthly accessories such as drums, weapons and alike. Other evidence of military thinking in terms of faith can be seen in a series of propaganda depictions of the defense of the eucharist. The central position is occupied by the king of Spain, who, sword in hand and cannons beside, is protecting the monstrance against pagan hordes (fig. 1). In such a context, angels regarded as divine soldiers seem to be a perfectly logic result of a way of seeing the Christian world as an army conducting a war with the evil until the end of time.

Depictions of angels in contemporary military outfit from the Cuzco school are generally referred to as *angeles arcabuceros* (fig. 2), which means arquebus armed angels. Although some of them hold in their hands a banner or a polearm, the ones equipped with a long firearm prevail, thus the general designation of the group (Gisbert, de Mesa 1996, p. 196). But is it correct?

The term “arquebus” is quite broad and ambiguous: in different periods and areas it was used for different armament (Matuszewski 2000, p. 78). To make a long story short, it can be stated that an arquebus is a relatively light, long firearm of comparatively small dimensions, designed to be shot off-hand (ibidem, p. 80; Kwaśniewicz 2004, p. 150; Peterson 2000, p. 13). Apart from a couple exceptions, which should be regarded as curios and an evidence of the ingenuity of the era, this type of weapon was muzzle-loaded and smooth-bored. The time of greatest significance of the arquebus on the battlefields was the 16th century, especially its first half. Later on, it was consequently being displaced by the musket – a much heavier, more powerful weapon, that needed a special supporting fork for aiming and shooting (ibidem, p. 14). Jacob de Gheyn’s infantry drill manual dating back to 1607 (first edition) depicts both musketeers and arquebusiers (fig. 3). In fact, despite many approaches to eliminate the arquebus, this type made it through well into the 17th century alongside with the heavy musket (Lugs 1982, p. 18; Peterson 2000, pp. 13–14). There simply was a demand for a lighter, more maneuverable and cheaper weapon, not to mention the fact that not every soldier was fit enough to use a more powerful gun. This situation started a process of lightening the musket, so that it could be shot without the fork – it was taking over more and more features of the arquebus (handiness), while retaining its own advantages (long range, high energy of the



Fig. 1. *Defence of the eucharist*, oil on canvas, San Pedro church, 18th c., Lima, Peru (phot. E. Kubiak)



Fig. 2. *Gabriel Dei*, oil on canvas, Master of Calamarca, 2nd half of the 17th–beginning of the 18th c., Calamarca, La Paz, Bolivia (phot. E. Kubiak)



Fig. 3. *De Wapenhandelinghe van Roers, Musketten ende Spiesen*, 3rd plate of the caliver section, copperplate (Gheyn 1608)

bullet). This was possible due to the technological progress. The new kind of weapon spread over in the modern European armies of the late 17th century – at that time the Spanish military could not be included into this club (Lugs 1982, p. 216; Matuszewski 2000, p. 85).

All our angels in question hold firearms of mediocre length, with a lightly curved buttstock. They appear to be quite light, since none of the celestial soldiers is equipped with a fork. They indeed have features of an arquebus, although one must bear in mind that the depictions date from the late 17th to early 18th century, which is the era when the old arquebuses should have been totally replaced by the new, lighter muskets. Such a modern weapon should be a proper armament of the heavenly forces. It wouldn't be hard to recognise a musket of this type in the hands of our angels, especially taking into consideration the stylisation of the artist. However, the firearms from the discussed paintings all have the already obsolete trigger levers and matchlock mechanisms. This could point against the modernized musket, but can be no ultimate proof, since even up-to-date European firearms from that time were furnished from time to time with those simple mechanisms (Peterson 2000, pp. 17–18). The decisive point lays in another pictographical evidence – the great painting of Melchora Pérez Holguín, *The Arrival of archibishop viceroy Morcillo at Potosi* from 1716 (fig. 5). One can see there the whole viceroy's guard corps, and what is especially interesting for us, the soldiers are not uniformly equipped. Some of them hold a pike, some have an old musket with a fork, yet others carry a firearm with no supporting accessory. The shooters keep match cords in their hands, which proves the guns have matchlocks, and each one of their weapons is furnished with a trigger lever. The scene testifies without a doubt, that despite 18th century uniforms, the corps is organized in an old *tercio* manner, dating back well to the 16th century. There is no big surprise about that, since every novelty made it through to the colonies with a huge delay. Moreover, the guards corps was not required to be very up to date as its role was mostly representative. We have all the right to assume that the authors of the angels' depictions took pattern from these troops, as they were the only regular unit at that time in the region (not to mention the field army in the distant Chile). Having said all this, we can come to a conclusion that the Andean military angels are most likely armed with an arquebus, as this type of weapon was obviously still very widespread in the Americas as late as the early 18th century (fig. 6).

The way of depicting the angels in the paintings in question reveal strong influence of the already mentioned de Gheyn's manual (figs. 3–4). Some pieces show only a limited resemblance to the Dutch artist's etch-



Fig. 4. *Letiel Die*, oil on canvas, Master of Calamarca, 2nd half of the 17th–beginning of the 18th c., Calamarca, La Paz, Bolivia (phot. E. Kubiak)



Fig. 5. *The Arrival of archbishop viceroy Morcillo at Potosi*, oil on canvas, Melchor Pérez Holguín, 1716, Museum of the Americas, Madrid, Spain (phot. E. Kubiak)



Fig. 6. *Arrival of archbishop viceroy Morcillo at Potosi*, oil on canvas, Melchor Pérez Holguín, 1716, Museum of the Americas, Madrid, Spain (details) (phot. E. Kubiak)



Fig. 7. *Asiel Timor Dei* Anonymous, oil on canvas, circle of the Master of Calamarca, 2nd half of the 17th–beginning of the 18th c. National Museum of Art, La Paz, Bolivia (phot. E. Kubiak)



Fig. 8. *Uriel Dei*, oil on canvas, Master of Calamarca, 2nd half of the 17th–beginning of the 18th c., Calamarca, La Paz, Bolivia (phot. E. Kubiak)



Fig. 9. *De Wapenhandelinghe van Roers, Musketten ende Spiessen*, 16th plate of the caliver section, copperplate (Gheyn 1608)



Fig. 10. Detail of the painting *Uriel Dei* compared to the detail of Jacob de Gheyn's illustration

ings in terms of composition, while others are very similar (Gisbert, de Mesa 1996, p. 198).

A couple of works show interesting features in treating of the weapons' details. This can confirm the Cuzco school's practice of executing various parts of the paintings by different, often shifting "specialists". For example, the Calamarca angels hold arquebuses with heavily stylized, decorative mechanisms. Sometimes it was done in such a manner that we can suspect the painter of being unaware of their way of functioning. On the other hand, in a piece entitled *Asiel Timor Dei* from the La Paz Museum the depiction of the firearm with a matchlock is very realistic (fig. 7). Its creator must have been well familiar with firearms, and most probably had access to one of them. Another interesting curio can be seen in the work *Uriel Dei* (fig. 8) – the angel is shown while pouring powder upon the firing pan, but... he holds no powder flask in his hand (*sic!*) (figs. 9–10). An acknowledged artist certainly wouldn't commit such an error.

The clothing of our celestial warriors was most probably inspired by the viceroy guards' uniforms – as already mentioned, it was the only regular military force in the region and the only unit that was richly outfitted. Moreover, the corps' function was primarily representative, and the duty itself quite prestigious. There is no surprise that the similarities between the angels' portrayal and that of the men from Holguin's painting are undeniable. However, the uniform of the divine soldiers was highly stylized (fig. 11) – lavishly puffed and ornamented in accordance to Cuzco school's taste (fig. 12).



Fig. 11. *Laeiel Dei*, oil on canvas Master of Calamarca, 2nd half of the 17th–beginning of the 18th c., Calamarca, La Paz, Bolivia (phot. E. Kubiak)



Fig. 12. *Aspiel Apetus Dei*, oil on canvas, Master of Calamarca, 2nd half of the 17th–beginning of the 18th c., Calamarca, La Paz, Bolivia (phot. E. Kubiak)

We can conclude that the intriguing colonial military angels are another evidence of South America developing in its own way and at its own pace. They testify a great spirit of separateness of the population of the Viceroyalty and their unique way of reception of some far-away intricate doctrine of the new European rulers. It is interesting, that the key to the formal analysis of this series is another great piece of art, Holguin's *The Arrival of the archbishop...* This case also shows that military equipment and armament can many times point out various interesting details and be a start of a fruitful discussion, even in such delicate fields as history of art.

The state of research of the colonial painting, including that of the Viceroyalty of Peru, is far from satisfactory. Our knowledge about the Andean military angels is comparably humble. The cause of this situation is the nationalistic reaction emerging in Latin America. One of its aspects is the marginalization of the colonial era culture as a product of European invasion. Thankfully, this sad picture is slowly changing for better due to a growing interest of American and European scholars. We can only hope that the colonial art will regain its rightful position in the consciousness of those communities tormented by conflicts and identity crises.

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STRESZCZENIE

PRZEDSTAWIENIA ANIOŁÓW Z BRONIĄ PALNĄ W IKONOGRAFII WICEKRÓLESTWA PERU

Anioły są często podejmowanym tematem w sztuce europejskiej. Podobnie miało się stać w przypadku malarstwa kolonialnego. W hiszpańskich dominium Wicekrólestwa Peru starą koncepcję zinterpretowano w sposób zupełnie unikatowy; posłańcy niebiescy przedstawieni zostali jako żołnierze uzbrojeni i wyekwipowani na współczesną im modłę. Obrazy te były dziełem malarzy pochodzenia indiańskiego, pracujących w ramach tzw. szkoły cuzqueńskiej. Ten ośrodek sztuki jak mało który stał się prawdziwym kulturowym tygłem w hiszpańskich koloniach. Wojskowe anioły fascynują nie tylko swoją wyjątkową postacią i strojami o barokowo-indiańskim przepychu, lecz także detalami dostarczającymi ciekawych informacji o koloniach w XVII i XVIII w. Jak się bowiem okazuje, broń przez nich dzierzona, choć powinna być nowoczesna, jest przestarzała. Paradoks ten nie dziwi, skoro malarz najprawdopodobniej wzorował się na gwardzistach wicekróla, a nawet oni byli zorganizowani i uzbrojeni w przestarzały sposób.

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