



## Interpretation of the sacred art of the San Juan del Valle Church in Loja-Ecuador

Interpretación del arte sacro de la Iglesia San Juan del Valle Loja-Ecuador

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### ABSTRACT

With the present investigation it has been possible to identify that in the container of the San Juan del Valle Church there are four pictorial works that are considered cultural patrimony of Ecuador, besides it has been possible to decode the iconography of sacred art. The objective of the study is to present to the readers the first approximations of the meaning of the symbols present in the colonial church of the city of Loja. The methodology was of qualitative character and by means of a documentary analysis, comparative of religious works in other contexts. The results of the research allow us

to have a clearer vision of the iconography of the sacred art of the colonial and republican period. It is concluded that this study will allow to deepen in the future other researches that are developed in the same line.

## RESUMEN

Con la presente investigación se ha logrado identificar que en el contenedor de la Iglesia San Juan del Valle existen cuatro obras pictóricas que son consideradas patrimonio cultural del Ecuador, además se ha logrado descodificar la iconografía del arte sacro. El objetivo del estudio es presentar a los lectores unas primeras aproximaciones del significado de los símbolos presentes que se incubaron en la iglesia colonial de la ciudad de Loja. La metodología fue de carácter cualitativo y mediante un análisis documental, comparativo de obras religiosas en otros contextos. Los resultados de la investigación permiten tener una visión más clara de la iconografía del arte sacro de la época colonial y republicana. Se concluye que este estudio permitirá a futuro profundizar a otras investigaciones que se desarrollen en la misma línea.

## Keywords / Palabras clave

Sacred art; symbology; cultural tourism; religious tourism; religious tourism

Arte sacro; simbología; turismo cultural; turismo religioso

## Introduction

In the field of interpretation, artistic heritage plays an important role because through this means it has been possible to preserve the history, the exploits of both kings and the church (Hatje, 1995; Kurkhard Schwetje, 2010) Quoted in Sanchez Ruiz, et al., (2020). On the other hand, Hatje (1995) mentions that different cultures and religions have developed countless symbols, through identity elements that are representative for a social group and have been transmitted from generation to generation over time.

For authors such as Gamper (2010) and Réau (2007a; 2008b) Cited in Sanchez et al., (2019) state that debates on religious symbology have increased, because iconography plays an important role in science as

it is the description of images and has a higher ambition to classify and interpret them.

Therefore, like Cirlot (1969), the study of religious symbols has other interests, such as revealing the meaning of each element, figure and symbol in pictorial works. For example, the contemplation of the work implies, then, a simultaneous and reciprocal "animation" between the spectator and the object of his vision. The sense or meaning of the work being understood as the participation of the spectator in its "life", through pictorial elements deeper than what already exists" (Mondrian, 1983, p.23) quoted in Kinzbruner (2004).

In this context, the San Juan del Valle Church, located in the city of Loja-Ecuador, has been taken as an object of study because in the colonial and republican times it was and still is one of the most relevant churches in safeguarding pictorial works with many years of antiquity. The objective of this research is to give a first approximations of the meaning of the religious symbols of the paintings, in the same way we want to increase future research in the field of symbolic interpretation.

The research questions were whether there are currently interpretations of the pictorial symbols of the sacred art of the church of San Juan del Valle. On the other hand, the independent and dependent variables were that studies on the interpretation of the sacred art of the San Juan del Valle church can help to generate new tourism proposals and thus diversify the offer and contribute to the development of postcovid tourism.

As for the results, it was found that the San Juan del Valle church in the city of Loja, Ecuador, houses four pictorial works that date back to the colonial and republican period, specifically from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The symbolism present is mostly related to the New Testament. In this context, God the father, son and holy spirit are the most repeated symbols in all the works of sacred art.

It is concluded that the investigation of the interpretation of the pictorial art of the church San Juan del Valle in the city of Loja, Ecuador, is strategic, the same that can help to generate tourism products and thus diversify the tourism offer in these times of crisis as it is post covid.

## Materials and Methods

The research starts with the collection of documentary information and based on the container of pictorial works inventoried by the Institute of Cultural Heritage of Ecuador (INPC), we took as reference the pictorial works of the container of the San Juan del Valle Church, pictorial works that have been inventoried for the heritage importance that as a legacy have been recognized by the year in which the material and technique were developed.

On the other hand, the methodology has a qualitative approach, which through a documentary and comparative analysis of iconographic elements of religious works developed in other contexts, we try to decode the elements and describe them, so that we can have a broader vision of the elements, colors and symbols present in the works developed in the San Juan del Valle Church. Based on the following authors, some iconographic elements have been decoded: (Réau, 2007; Carmona Muela, 2015; Gibson, 2011 and Esteban Lorente, 2002).

## Results

In this section of the results, the symbology of each artistic work that has been considered as cultural patrimony of the San Juan del Valle Church is exposed and explained.

**Figure 1.** Souls in purgatory



Source: Institute of Cultural Heritage (INPC). Historical period: 1849.  
Location: San Juan del Valle Church

The composition is distributed in three levels: in the upper level is the trinity with images of front and full body, on the left is Christ seated with a tertiary mantle and holding the cross, instrument of your passion; on the right the eternal father seated with his left hand holding a scepter, symbol of sovereignty and authority; in the upper part the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove with wings spread with flashes of light; this scene on a background of clouds. The second level and on clouds are some saints, saints, martyrs, apostles, bishops and founders of religious orders which are divided into two horizontal groups; between the first and second level on the left side is the Virgin Mary in prayerful position with her hands clasped to her chest. In the third level there are several people in red tones among them a bishop, cardinal and semi naked people, as representation of the purgatory; also Saint Dominic praying, Saint Francis, Saint John the Evangelist with his cross of reed, of right profile with the arms extended forward, to the center Saint Anthony on clouds in three quarters and of left profile his right hand is extended toward a person, among them an angel of back supports the arms of a person, behind Saint Anthony there is an angel supported a child, toward the right a Gregorian celebration of mass.

**Figure 2.** Christ



Historical period: XIX. Location: San Juan del Valle Church Source: Cultural Heritage Institute (INPC)

On the front face the image of Christ in full body and sedentary with the head in foreshortened right, looking to the front; his long hair, beard and brown eyes. His arms are bent downwards, in his left hand he holds the end of a pennant and in his right hand he holds a cross,

instrument of his Passion, and the other end of the pennant with the inscription that says "Come to me, all you who are burdened: I will relieve you", this biblical passage is found in (Matthew 11: 28). He wears a red tunic representing the pain and sacrifice of his passion and death that alludes the red to the color of blood, with a blue tertiary mantle, in the neck has golden floral decorations, the background is in brown tones.

**Figure 3.** Agnus Dei



Source: Institute of Cultural Heritage (INPC). Historical period: XIX.  
Location: San Juan del Valle Church

The lamb, symbol of the "Ecce agnus dei" (translated from Latin, Lamb of God) surrounded by flashes and clouds, is lying on a brown book with seven golden medallions, representing the apocalyptic seals. First Seal Revelation 6: 1,2: The white Horseman represents the antichrist. Second Seal: Revelation 6: 3,4: The vermilion or red horseman represents the war. Third Seal: Revelation 6: 5,6: "The black horseman" Represents economic crisis, death, hardship, malnutrition and famine. Fourth Seal: Revelation 6: 7,8 The yellow horseman represents disease and death. Fifth Seal: Revelation 6: 9,11: Here it speaks of those who will be martyred for their faith in Christ during the time of the end (Revelation 6:9-11). The white garments symbolize the dignity conferred by the righteousness of Christ (Revelation 19:8; 3:5; 7:14) Sixth Seal: Revelation 6: 12,17: When the sixth of the seven seals is opened, a mighty earthquake occurs, causing a massive crisis and terrible devastation - along with unusual astronomical phenomena (Revelation 6:12-14) Joel 2:31 says: " The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, before the great and

dreadful day of the LORD comes. Seventh Seal: Revelation 8: 1,5: In this last seal, God announces 7 judgments worse than the previous ones, that is why in heaven they make a silence. Those 7 judgments that follow are the 7 trumpets. At the bottom two angels, in profile and in prayerful position on the clouds, which may denote a link between heaven and earth.

**Figure 4.** Trinidad



Source: Institute of Cultural Heritage (INPC). Historical period: XVIII. Location: San Juan del Valle Church

In this scene the trinity is identified God the father with the triangular halo over his head that represents and is usually an exclusive attribute of God the Father, above the clouds that represent the link between heaven and earth and the globe that is symbol of sovereignty over the world. On the right side the son with the cross symbol of his passion and death with golden powers symbol of his deity and his flaming heart with a crown of thorns symbol of the immense love of Jesus towards men and in the upper central part the dove with its wings spread out shining with flashes of light.

## Conclusions

The present investigation has the purpose of contributing to the science of the interpretation of the symbols and to have the first approximations in the matter of knowing the meaning of the color, of the position and elements that each character sustains. On the other hand, the research wants to contribute and generate new research in

the field of cultural tourism, because the symbolic interpretation can be used to develop new cultural tourism products such as interpretive routes of the symbolism of sacred art, theatrical performances, audio guides of symbolic interpretation, among other tourism products.

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