

# The tree of life in the ruta de la plata potosi

## Abstract

The following article is part of a broader investigation into the catechetical function of mural painting in the churches of the old Ruta de la Plata between Potosi and Arica. Here it is proposed to identify the ornamentation of wall paintings of the church of Copacabana Andamarca, located in the Ruta de la Plata, the formal origin, function and meaning of the decorative elements of the main scenes of the murals programs. Flowers, trees, birds, cats and dogs and frameworks, among other elements decorate and link the main scenes of the murals, but also may contain iconographic meanings that provide relevant information for the study and analysis of Andean society and culture of the century XVIII. We believe that the symbolic image of the tree of life could have a special role in the decoration of Copacabana Andamarca. However, its symbolic value has not always been identified as such; on numerous occasions simply it has been interpreted as a decorative forest alluding to a paradise or ideal oasis amid the arid highlands. Through an iconographic analysis we aim to provide information that reinforces the idea that this tree of life image was intended to illustrate the fate reserved for those who accept the Christian faith.

Volume 3 Issue 3 - 2018

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**Received:** April 16, 2018 | **Published:** June 19, 2018

## Introduction

Mural painting in the geographical area called southern Andean has been investigated and treated by different scholars and researchers who have conducted a comprehensive analysis of the iconographic and ornamental content of the murals main churches paintings within the ancient doctrines of Cuzco, La Paz and the silver, in the old viceroyalty of Peru (Figure 1). So far it has been carried out rather a survey and established some deeper analysis, especially over the last years, still leaving a lot of content to identify, for example, determine the intentions of the doctrinaire, artist or artists and message you wanted to convey to the evangelized, from the early seventeenth century and during the eighteenth century. A remarkable joint effort between countries sharing this artistic heritage began in the 1980s, time a fieldwork was conducted, establishing a register of Andean mural funded by the Organization of American States with teams of specialists from Peru, Bolivia and Chile: "Cadastral evaluation and Study of Mural Painting in the South Central Andean area".<sup>1</sup> Fruit of this fieldwork was the report "Mural Painting in the Andes".<sup>2</sup> The original intention was to make a joint publication of this research, which was not performed and finally resulted in three separate publications: by Peru, Mural painting in the Southern Andes, published by the Collection Art and Treasures of Peru's Bank credit in 1993;<sup>3</sup> Mural painting in Bolivia was published in the South Central Andean area in 1998;<sup>4</sup> "Diagnostic study and conservation of cultural heritage in the Andean region of northern Chile: architecture and mural painting" in Chile a working document was generated.<sup>5</sup> Filed at the Museum of Azapa in Arica. We might note that none of these studies has delved into these images as distinct from a simple orchard; which would justify the approach taken by the authors of this article, who propose a symbolic interpretation associated with the tree of life and the earthly paradise.

<sup>1</sup>OAS 1988-1989; Coordinator: Luis Briones.

<sup>2</sup>by Chilean researchers Juan Chacama, Luis Briones, Gustavo Espinoza; Teresa Gisbert, Juan Carlos Jemio by Bolivia; Jorge Flores, Roberto Samanez and Elisabeth Kuon, Peru specialists.

<sup>3</sup>Samanez, Ronerto, Kuon, Elisabeth, Banco de Credito del Peru, Peru, 1993.

<sup>4</sup>Juan Carlos Jemio and architects José de Mesa and Teresa Gisbert, among others, La Paz, Bolivia.

<sup>5</sup>Briones, Luis Arevalo, Patricia, Chacama, Juan Espinoza, Gustavo, in the año 1990.

Ananda lately Cohen, Suzanne Stratton Pruitt and the authors of this article, among others, have shown various aspects of mural painting center-southern Andean area. In the following article we propose an iconographic analysis of plant ornamentation of mural painting of the church of Copacabana Andamarca, located on the ancient trade route that linked Potosi, the area around Lake Poopo, and Oruro with the altiplano and Chilean mountains in its way to the port of Arica. The temple preserves a complete program of the eighteenth century mural, in which the profusion of trees suggests a background beyond the merely ornamental. Our analysis suggests a symbolic interpretation of these images (Figure 2).



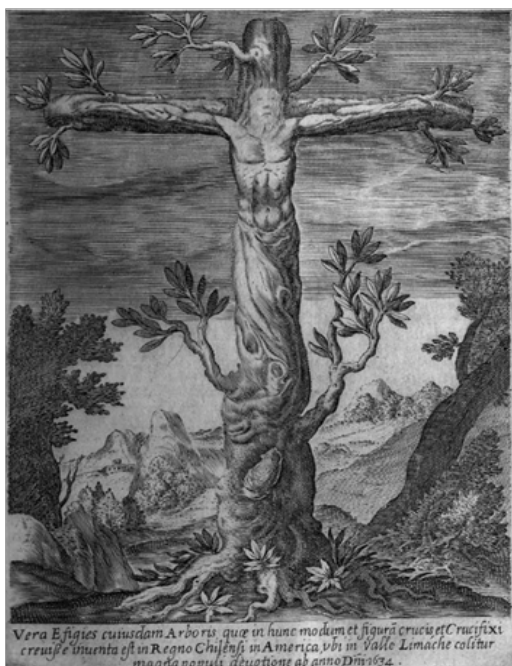
**Figure 1** Copacabana Andamarca silver on the route.

## The pictorial decoration of the Andean churches

The evangelization of neophytes by religious orders in America followed the models of the Middle Ages for the catechesis of illiterates.<sup>6</sup> Mendicant orders and the clergy in general used the paintings and

<sup>6</sup>View Domingo Antonio Ramos Prieto "Religious Transfers to America. The celebrations of Easter in the sixteenth century" in *Hispania Sacra*, Vol 53, No 108, 2001, pp. 503-529.

sculptures as visual storage devices to help the crowd to remember the contents catechists communicate verbally. At the end of the sixteenth century religious art was a full component incorporated in the Andean missionary oratory.<sup>7</sup> Fray Diego Valades attribute the creation of this method of instruction Franciscan monks who had used it long before I practiced other religious orders. Jesuit José de Acosta in his treatise on pastoral Andean procuranda Indorum (1576) says that although the Inca empire had more than seven languages, missionaries used pictures to illustrate articles and teaching the Christian faith.<sup>8</sup> Later, José de Arriaga (1564-1622), in 1621, suggests that one of the best ways to remove idolatry was to encourage Indians to participate in the foundation and decoration of churches, even chiding some priests for their indifference to artistic matters.<sup>9</sup> Mural painting, being part of the building is decorated, it retains the original order in which it was prepared. By studying their subjects we can interpret the intent with which they were made, also being able to analyze its contents in the temporal context in which they were made. The mural painting is, therefore, a historical and social document. According to sources available in the church archives (Arica, Arequipa, La Paz, Sucre), in the books of factories and inventories, it is possible sometimes to identify who made the paintings, adventuring that doctrineros they selected topics, or perhaps prosecutor or curaca. Often the work was executed by an individual artist; when the composition was higher, we can assume that the local labor additional labor was used (Figure 3).<sup>1-10</sup>



**Figure 2** Engraving of the Christ of Limache, in the "Historical Relationship" of Alonso de Ovalle.

In this vein, Teresa Gisbert says that in general, the mural is a collective work directed by a doctrinaire, it may belong to a religious order. These works have been executed with proper catechetical

<sup>7</sup>Mujica, Ramon, "Reading without a book" in *The Virgin Saints and Angels, south american Paintings 1600-1825 from the Thoma Collection*, Skira, 2006, p. 42.

<sup>8</sup>Mujica Ramon, op.cit, p. 43.

<sup>9</sup>See quote Pablo Joseph de Arriaga, *The extirpation of Idolatry in Peru*, trans. and ed. L. Clark Keating (Lexington, 1968), 95, 138. Bailey, *Andean Hybrid Baroque*, pp. 303-304.

language neophytes, no missing references to the situation of the place or premises, such as idolatry or farming population, among others. Large surfaces painted walls make suppose that these paintings were made mostly by Indians, and it would have been impossible to pay skilled labor so numerous.<sup>10</sup> We are considering the lush vegetation and abundant birds and colorful, completely oblivious to the desert environment where they were built these temples, we might assume, not unreasonably, that these images could well represent the earthly paradise and its central element -the tree life- illustrating the message that the missionaries wanted to convey to the faithful, presenting paradise as the destination that every neophyte soul aspires to achieve (Figure 4).



**Figure 3** General view of the Sanctuary.



**Figure 4** Image of the Leviathan.

## The earthly paradise

At this point it is important to remember that, for Christians, the paradise represents the condition before the fall. This concept, an essential part of catechesis who performed the missionaries in America, is described in the book of Genesis: "Yahweh-God planted a garden in Eden eastward, and there he put the man he had fashioned. Yahweh-God made sprout from the soil every kind of seductive sight and good

<sup>10</sup>Gisbert, Teresa, "Introduction to Mural" in *Chacama*, Juan Briones, Luis and others *Mural Painting in Los Andes*, Research Project, University of Tarapaca, Chile (OEA 1993) pp. 1-2.



for food, and the tree of life in the midst of the garden, and the tree of knowledge of good and evil. A river went out of Eden to water the garden and from there it divided to form four arms [...] Yahweh-God took the man and settled him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it. And Yahweh-God gave man this command: You can eat of every tree of the garden. The earthly paradise was a theme current in the sixteenth century intelligentsia. The signals of the previous century had implemented a messianism that presaged a change coming, a new era. The reconquest of Spain, combined with the discovery of a new continent, were clear signs that the times foretold in the Gospel were being fulfilled.<sup>11</sup> Exemplified by Christopher Columbus himself, who was considered a "chosen" to reach these new lands.<sup>12</sup> During his third voyage, Columbus in his letter to the king states: "I am very settled in the mood where I said that there is the Garden of Eden, and rest on the reasons and sobrescriptas authorities."<sup>13</sup> We know that he always felt that he had reached the East and was convinced he had arrived to those hot lands that should be what he described. According to the chronicler of the voyage of Columbus, Fray Bartolome de Las Casas, the famous admiral was based on sacred theologians and philosophers to claim that the terrestrial paradise was in the confines of the East, because this was a templadísimo place (Figure 5).<sup>14</sup>



**Figure 5** Local scene, indigenous carrying a mule and procession.

Later, Antonio de León Pinelo (1596-1660), Cronista Mayor de Indias, descendant of a Portuguese convert, in his book *The Paradise in the New World*, places Eden in the Amazon jungle between Peru, Bolivia and Brazil and four rivers that bathed according to the Scriptures: the Rio de la Plata (including Parana and Paraguay), Orinoco, Magdalena and Amazon. The work included an illustration with a map of Eden: *Continens Paradisi*.<sup>15</sup> Contemporary Pinelo in Europe, the prolific Jesuit priest Athanasius Kircher published in 1675,

Noah's Ark. He shows an illustration the topography of the terrestrial paradise. Irrigated by the Tigris, Euphrates, and Rammer Guijón, paradise is square; The Tree of Life rises to the center of the garden, and Adam and Eve appear at the foot of leafy tree of the knowledge of good and evil, while some cherubs guarding the gates of Eden.<sup>16</sup> In the iconography of paradise, presented in works like those mentioned, The Tree of Life always appears as a central element, as the axis around which all the geography of Eden is ordered. Accordingly, it is safe to assume that the iconography present in the walls of Copacabana Andamarca is an illustration of this celestial landscape, represented there to support catechesis and strengthen the devotion of the faithful, the final destination showing them which would lead her faith.

## The tree of life

The representation of trees to decorate temples was quite used in colonial times.<sup>17</sup> Two clear examples stated in its mnemonic function, to remember and exercise spirituality. In the Jesuit monastery of San Pedro, Lima, two allegorical paintings of the eighteenth century-the tree of life and its fruits and tree death and its fruit- offer a complete theological and practical guide to avoid deception and achieve inner perfection.<sup>18</sup> This mnemonic scheme comes in the monastic environment in the twelfth century, when the tree is like the soul, and its fruits, virtues or vices.<sup>19</sup> The Tree of Life represented in San Pedro de Lima, carries a legend in each of the twelve branches and fruits, as well as in the trunk. Beneath the painting, a poster reads: O happy and very happy that the tree of life within itself constant plant and grow it. Rigor and penance is born among thorns; but in a short time spring immeasurable delight. Those principles is crying, but the vanquished passions, bears the proud fruit. Peace, comfort and joy. And if irrigation virtues sublimates his glass. Everything is fire of love. Everything is life (...) His ultimate goal is Heaven and is an infinite glory.<sup>11-20</sup> That forevermore there is no penalty, all is bliss. In your hands it (...) Man (if you look attentive) achieving flowers and fruits such celestial seed. He flees the world and its glories. They are galanas lies. And the cultivation of these plants. All your care applies. It will flourish in lozano you. If you water with continuous virtues; flourish them (...) <sup>20</sup>

From the above discussion we might surmise that the tree of life is presented as a symbol of the soul that we must cultivate and nurture, drinking from the Fountain of Life which is Christ. It would feed through the sacraments that we receive throughout life, which indicate the main stages of Christian commitment. Within the earthly paradise, The Tree of Life is especially important: "The Tree of Life is the central tree: its sap is the heavenly dew, fruit give immortality (return to center of being, Edenic state) (Figure 6). So it is with the fruits of the tree of life of Eden and that heavenly Jerusalem, golden apples of the Hesperides garden."<sup>21</sup> But in the Messianic context described above, at the time of the discovery of America, Creoles and Europeans fed during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the

<sup>11</sup>See Elliot, J, *The Imperial Spain*, RBA Collectibles, Barcelona, 2006, pp. 70-72.

<sup>12</sup>Leon Azcarate, Juan Luis, "The Book of Prophecies (1504), Christopher Columbus: The Bible and Descubrimiento of America" in *Religion and Culture*, vol. 53, 2007. P. 361.

<sup>13</sup>"Letter to Santa" 08/31/1948. In Todorov, Tzvetan, *The Conquest of America: the problem of the other*, Siglo XXI Editores, Mexico, 2003, p. 26.

<sup>14</sup>De Leon, Juan Luis, *Op. Cit.*, P. 365.

<sup>15</sup>Gómez-Tabanera, Jose M., "Bestiary and paradise in Columbus's voyages: the legacy of European medieval folklore Americanist historiography" in *International Association of Hispanics (AIH)*, University of California, Irvine, 1992 p.76.

<sup>16</sup>Papavero, Nelson, Teixeira, Dante and others *History of Biogeography*, I. The evolutionary period, Fondo de Cultura Economica, Mexico, 2004, p. 14.

<sup>17</sup>Mardones, Camila, "Ornament and significance in the colonial mural painting: representation plant in rural churches in Oruro" *Revista Iberoamericana*, XVI, 61, 2016, pp. 51-70.

<sup>18</sup>Mujica Ramon, *op.cit.*, p. 44.

<sup>19</sup>In this regard, Carruthers, Mary, *The Book of Memory. A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp. 301-333.

<sup>20</sup>Paragraph billboard illustration showing the tree of life in San Pedro de Lima. In Mujica Pinilla, *Ibid*, p. 44.

<sup>21</sup>Chevalier, Jean, *Dictionary of Symbols*, Herder, p.118.

reading of Revelation (22:2) with respect to the tree of life leads to another interpretation, the reference of various trees, a forest or trees that represent the tree of life in the heavenly Jerusalem, the Vulgate text used by missionaries to time, relates: “in medio plateæ ejus et ex utraque part fluminis vitæ lignum adferens fructus duodecim menses per singula reddentia fructum suum et folia ligni ad sanitatem Pentium”<sup>22</sup>



**Figure 6** Side niche, San Agustín surrounded by trees, plinth and valance.

“In the middle of the city street and on either side of the river, it is a tree of life, bearing twelve fruits, yielding its fruit every month: and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations”<sup>23</sup> The text tells us that the tree is on either side of the river; therefore, it seems that is not one; Unlike the only tree that would be in the center of earthly paradise. Although the iconography often uses a tree of life, we could be facing allusion several trees whose branches, like the souls of Christians thrive on The Fountain. These documentary evidence, which account for the meanings that images of the tree of life and paradise were for Europeans of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, reinforce our interpretation that paints the walls of Copacabana Andamarca not be considered as mere representations of an imagined landscape, but rather as a spiritual landscape and final destination of the path of Christian faith (Figure 7).

## Copacabana andamarca

Copacabana Andamarca is a town in the Bolivian altiplano, in the area of Oruro, on the ancient trade route that runs from Silver Potosi to Oruro, Cuzco and -to the poniente- toward the Chilean port of Arica. The church of Copacabana Andamarca was built in the eighteenth century, probably shortly before 1754, date incised on the wall behind one of the altarpieces and mural painting corresponds to the end of the century. Ecclesiastical policies issued by the Archbishop of La Plata, propose decorate churches didactically, like open books. In this context, the issue of final judgment and paradise would be recurring themes in decorating churches in the silver route, repainted in the last third of the eighteenth century.<sup>24</sup> The whole ceremonial ritual of

<sup>22</sup>Latin Vulgate Bible, the Holy Bible in Latin.

<sup>23</sup>Translation

<sup>24</sup>Guzman, Fernando, Paola Corti and Magdalena Pereira, "ecclesiastical policy and free movement of ideas after nturas pi murals made during the eighteenth century in the churches of the Ruta de la Plata "in History, 50, II, 2017, pp: 525-554.

Copacabana Andamarca, is one of the best preserved examples as “open chapel” in Bolivia, with the characteristics described by George Kubler and John Mc Andrew for temples in Mexico and Teresa Gisbert and José de Mesa (Figure 8).



**Figure 7** Presbytery and altarpiece of the main altar. Copacabana of Andamarca.

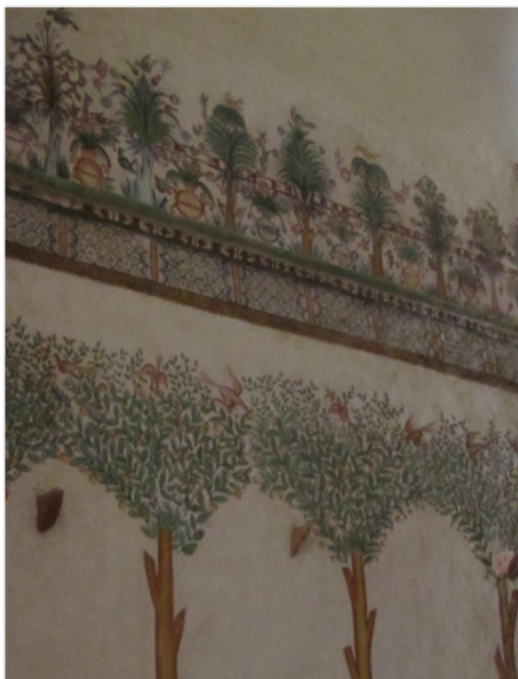


**Figure 8** Trees on the Leviathan scene.

The sanctuary of Copacabana was attended by the Augustinians temple, who were in charge of that extensive doctrine, like Toledo, near Copacabana, which include churches profusely adorned with vegetable ornaments, including the cover of Paria, and the walls Copacabana Andamarca, Rosapata and Soracachi. Teresa Gisbert emphasizes that Copacabana Andamarca has inside one of the most beautiful picture groups of Bolivia. On the walls are painted trees lifesize with exotic fruits and full of birds, contrasting with the desert landscape of the surrounding area, which offers two explanations: “The Gospel Indians preached were told that heaven was a flowery garden.



The Indians did not represent the sky with clouds like Western culture but with flowers and birds.<sup>25</sup> Matching the description of Gisbert, cataloging heritage of Oruro led by Carlos Jemio, refer to the pictorial decoration of Copacabana “as a flower garden (...) the mock forest that confirms the yearning for fertile nature, in the highlands hostile. The memory of orchards and gardens is present not only the Spaniards who lived there, but extends to the natives who periodically migrated to the valleys in search of products. Murra theory of enclaves that keep indigenous communities over the heads of the valleys, explain this artistic phenomenon of transmission plant motifs of the tropics to the highland churches (Figure 9).”<sup>26</sup>



**Figure 9** Presbiterio Copacabana; friso con palmeras y árboles alternados.

## Conclusion

In the line of the above, we hold that the catechetical program of the Church of Copacabana Andamarca is part of the apocalyptic message introduced by religious orders, in this case the Augustinians. The last years, the salvation of souls and the promised paradise, are recurring themes in the story of the Apocalypse and the wall area of Oruro and other Andean regions paintings.<sup>27</sup> We also rely on the biblical text already mentioned: “In the middle of the city street and on either side of the river, is a tree of life, bearing twelve fruits, yielding its fruit every month: and the leaves of the tree they were for the healing of the nations.”<sup>28</sup> We can guess that trees Copacabana, rather than being mere evocation of Eden, are carriers plus a rich iconographic content that would be linked to the aftermath and salvation; ornamental plant, trees, birds and fruits stand out and are reiterative between decoration and color of the walls of the temple. Copacabana Andamarca is

particularly striking proliferation trees in the chancel and part of the nave. This lavish decoration may contain the fruits that the tree of life gives us for the salvation of the soul, and the birds could symbolize the angels messengers, Gisbert link established in the paradise of talking birds. Doctrineros accept, based on the Catechism of 1584, the sky was a town bird garden, equating them with angels.<sup>29</sup> In the presbytery, in the base of the church of Copacabana, palms and trees alternate. The palm tree is regarded as a Christological tree, the tree of paradise par excellence, which is inclined to the passage of the Holy Family during their flight to Egypt, to San José to harvest their dates and offer them to Jesus. Palm is, at once a symbol of Paradise, Christians depicted as a cool oasis in the desert, and emblem of the rewards promised to the martyrs.<sup>30</sup> Upon entering the temple of Copacabana Andamarca, in the middle of the ship, it seems we were in the stream of the heavenly Jerusalem, in the middle of paradise. Such experience must live the old settlers of Copacabana. According to our interpretation, these images were painted for this purpose, thanks to the unique talent of the Andean artists who represented what ever listened to homilies and sermons, or, read and seen in prints and engravings. These images show souls seeking salvation how to move towards The Fountain at the end of the avenue, in order to receive the sacraments at the altar where the Eucharist is taught. These images, far from representing an idealized geography.<sup>21–27</sup>

## Acknowledgements

None.

## Conflict of interest

Author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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<sup>25</sup>Sachauer, Philipp and Gisbert, Teresa, rural churches, La Paz and Oruro, Editorial Gisbet and CIA, La Paz, 2010, p.70.

<sup>26</sup>Jemio, Carlos, general coordinator "Oruro catalog of its urban and rural architectural heritage" Bol 87/004 IBC-Project UNDP / UNESCO-CORDENOR, Editorial Don Bosco, Bolivia, 1993, pp. 138,139.

<sup>27</sup>Are known Andahuaylillas paintings representing the two paths. Flores, Kuon and Samanez 1993, 138-142. Cohen Suarez, 2016, 51-82.

<sup>28</sup>Vulgate translation.

<sup>29</sup>Gisbert, Teresa, op.cit, 153.

<sup>30</sup>Reau, Louis, Iconography of Christian Art, Ediciones del Serbal, Barcelona, 2000, p.161. (QUAD Bible quote the holy family is greeted by palms "

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