

## ILLUMINATION AND MINIATURES IN COLONIAL MEXICO

IT is unnecessary to recall that the art of Illumination traces its origin to the monasteries of the Middle Ages. Patient monks and friars, being excellent penmen and spurred on by the constant desire for ornament in the various branches of art cultivated by the Religious Orders, began by decorating the initial letters of their manuscripts, and as they used gold and very bright colors for the purpose, they gave light, as it were, to the rest of the text, which was in black lettering. For that reason the name of "illuminators" was given to those admirable artists who were able to portray the image of Christ or Our Lady within the limited space of an initial, or to trace curious devices of men, animals or flowers along the margins of a missal or a breviary.

Later on, Illumination was also called Miniature, but this was taking a part for the whole, as the expression was derived from the word *minium*, red, the color most abundantly used.

It is needless to say that the invention of printing, by cheapening the former excessive cost of a book, banished the art of the miniaturist from its dominions. Illumination became more rare every day, and it was decidedly on the wane when America was discovered. Nevertheless, all the monasteries of New Spain owned choir-books with beautiful designs on their leaves of parchment, as may be testified by those formerly belonging to the Monastery of San Agustín that are now exposed to public view in the National Museum of Mexico City.

Great progress was made in the illumination of choir-books in Spain from 1572 to 1589, for during this period Philip II ordered a great number of them for the Escorial. Not only Spanish, but also Flemish and Italian artists worked on them, and the influence of the latter was so

great that thenceforward those illuminated in Mexico were almost all worked in the Italian manner.

We find the first mention of choir-books in New Spain in a letter written by Don Juan de Zumárraga to Prince Philip (Philip II) in 1547: "At present," he writes, "we are making very good choir-books in parchment." Don Diego Bermúdez de Castro relates, in his "Teatro Angelopolitano," that when Don Diego Ossorio Romano was Bishop of Puebla (1548-1607) the Cathedral Chapter besought "the famous Master Luis Lagarto" to come over from Spain in order to illuminate the choir-books that were needed; that they paid all his expenses and that the thirty-three books that he made cost one hundred thousand pesos.

This artist was in the habit of signing his productions: *Luis de la Vega Lagarto*, or merely, *L. L.*, and his work (though somewhat affected), was undoubtedly the best of its kind in Mexico. In nearly all the manuscripts illuminated by him that we have examined, the mantle of Our Lady is adorned with a border of small figures resembling lizards, which appears to be a characteristic trait of his work, and probably a playful allusion to his name.

Another penman who greatly distinguished himself was Fray Miguel de los Ángeles, an Augustinian friar, who flourished in Mexico at the beginning of the 18th century and illuminated the choir-books of the famous monastery of his Order. Many of his productions are still preserved in that old church (now the National Library), and are very noteworthy, especially one of them, containing a Requiem Mass and Office for the Dead. The initial letters of this are original and very artistically conceived, if rather macabre; many are represented as made up of fragments of human skulls and bones, and others are designed in black and white only, on a ground of *petatillo*, or basket work. The borders of many of the leaves are also noteworthy, full as they are of emblems relative to the sovereignty of Death; and it is very evident, and at the same time remarkable, that the notes of the pentagram were

drawn with one stroke of the quill, a fact which indicates the rapid methods of this artist in his work.

From the 16th century onwards, the Titles and Letters Patent of Nobility granted by the Spanish sovereigns were beautifully illuminated, their principal features being coats-of-arms, and miniatures of the reigning monarch or patron saint of the recipient, in many cases real works of art. But there was little opportunity for Mexican illuminators to show off their abilities in this line. It is a credit to the Inquisition, (not the only good thing that is to be laid to the credit of that often unjustly reviled tribunal) that the Diplomas it issued to *Consultores* and *Alguaciles* of the Holy Office were artistically illuminated. The most beautiful specimen we have seen, formerly in the archives of the Convento de la Concepción, one of the oldest in Mexico, and now preserved in the National Museum, bears the date of the 27th of October 1617, and was granted to Juan Esteban del Real, as Familiar of the Inquisition. Of its numerous miniatures, that of Saint Catherine is most noteworthy. (The wife of del Real was called Catalina de la Barrera.) Not quite so successful is the Patent of Consultor of the Holy Office issued in favour of Don Jerónimo de Luna on the 15th of November 1664, and now in the possession of his lineal descendant, the Marqués de Guadalupe.

There must have been quite a number of these diplomas in Mexico, but most of them have been lost. It should be borne in mind that Sebastián de Arteaga, undoubtedly the best master of the Spanish Mexican School of painting, was himself a Comisario of the Holy Office and it may be presumed that he had a hand in some of these illuminations.

Although Spanish illumination has been charged with being sombre in its tones, these Diplomas of the Inquisition were illuminated in the most brilliant fashion and preserve to this day their original lustre.

When the printing-press did away with the illumination of books, the term miniature began to be applied more freely, and soon was considered as synonymous with any



CONDE DE SAN PEDRO DEL ALAMO  
(1790)



CONDESA DE SAN PEDRO DEL ALAMO  
(1800)

The extensive use of fans during the 18th century provided an ample field for miniature painters. Many an artistic vignette was produced on paper, kid or parchment, to match ribs of bone, ivory or mother of pearl, in many cases beautifully carved and gilded by Mexican artists.

Very few Mexican miniature painters are known to us, for they hardly ever signed their productions. We have seen some by a certain Gálvez, and others by José R. and Manuel Castro, the three corresponding to the first quarter of the 19th century. But according to Don Tadeo Ortiz, a great lady of the Viceregal Court, the Marquesa de Villahermosa, was a very good miniature painter. "Her portraits," he says, "could be exposed in the best exhibitions of Paris or Rome, not only on account of their great likeness to the originals, but also for their beautiful colouring and excellent finish. In fact, the work of this lady painter can compete with the best style of European productions."

One of the oldest miniature portraits painted in Mexico that we have seen is that of the third Marquesa de San Francisco, Doña Dolores Romero de Terreros, in true Louis XVI style, as evinced by her coiffure and bonnet. She is represented holding a flower in her hand, a conventional gesture from which even men did not always escape, as in the case of the third Conde de Regla, who was also portrayed wearing an open shirt, after the style of Lord Byron.

Military uniforms, with their brilliant colours lent great splendour to miniature portraits, in marked contrast to the sombre tones of civilians and ecclesiastics. Groups were rarely produced.

Ivory miniatures used to be mounted in ebony, silver, gold or enamel, the slender frames sometimes studded with precious stones. At the beginning of the 19th century they used to be enclosed in leather cases resembling those of daguerreotypes.

Daguerreotypes, on one hand, and on the other the excellent wax portraits made by José Francisco Rodríguez,<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>The "Diario de México," of June 4th, 1810, assumes that Francisco Rodríguez invented wax portraits, but this could hardly be the case, since it is well known that from the 16th century several artists made them in Europe, Benvenuto Cellini among others.

were the cause of the decay of miniature portrait painting in Mexico.

Small wax figures were modeled in Mexico in the 17th and 18th centuries, mostly representing religious subjects, such as Crucifixions and Entombments, but most of them have perished, owing undoubtedly to the frailty of the material used. In the Museo Arqueológico at Madrid, there may be seen a set of wax figures of Aztec priests, made by Francisco García in 1777, and presented to that establishment by the Marqués de Prado Alegre.

With regard to wax portraits, their chief attraction consists in the fact that they were produced by the united efforts of goldsmiths, sculptors, and miniaturists. Personages were always represented in profile and sometimes adorned with real hair, pieces of lace and silk stuffs, and seed pearls. Set in oval ebony frames, some of them resemble cameos.

Judging by the few remaining specimens of his work, Rodríguez was very skillful at portraying the local celebrities of his time, such as Morelos, Hidalgo and the Emperor Agustín I: and, according to the "Diario," all fashionable ladies and gentlemen of the early 19th century had their portraits modelled in wax by him. The likenesses were so striking, that when Lord Cochrane visited Mexico, he attempted to induce this artist to come with him to London, but Rodríguez declined the offer and remained in his native country.

MANUEL ROMERO DE TERREROS,  
MARQUÉS DE SAN FRANCISCO

UNIVERSIDAD NACIONAL DE MÉXICO