

*The Casa del Deán: New World Imagery in a Sixteenth-Century Mexican Mural Cycle.* Penny C. Morrill.

Joe R. and Teresa Lozano Long Series in Latin American and Latino Art and Culture. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015. xiii + 298 pp. \$75.

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Penny Morrill's wonderful book *The Casa del Deán* is a clearly written, well-researched, and beautifully illustrated monograph that studies one of the few remaining private mural cycles of sixteenth-century Mexico. It is at once a depressing tale of the murals' partial destruction in the twentieth century due to local disregard for Mexico's patrimony as well as a gripping and surprising account of the history of their creation and significance.

The murals appear in the interior of a house built around 1580 in Puebla, Mexico, as the residence for Tomás de la Plaza. The house had remained in the family until 1952 when it was sold to a general who wished to demolish it in order to build a movie theater. Already, however, the murals were whitewashed in 1930s by one of Tomás de la Plaza's descendants, so as to hide them from view in order to "avoid possible nationalization" of the house. Moving from this sad recent history, the reader is treated first to an account of the more recent restoration of the building and the murals and then a history of the patron. This history is based on finely grained archival research, and some of the most important documents are transcribed in the appendix, such as Tomás de la Plaza's last will and testament. What is critical about the archival research is not just the assemblage of a more complete biography of Tomás de la Plaza. (He was a Spanish secular priest from Extremaduro who rose to be the wealthy dean of Puebla's cathedral.) Equally important, and also not an end unto itself, Morrill gives as complete a description as possible of the exterior facade and the interior spaces. (The near complete destruction of the house to make way for the Cineplex makes some of the description conjectural.)

The biography is a framing device that enables the reader to understand how a patron in Mexico could have devised a mural program that deployed the classical figures of the Sibyls of antiquity drawn from French sixteenth-century sources and the allegorical figures of chariots of Christian triumph based on Petrarch's *Trionfi*. The inventory of Tomás de la Plaza's library reveals his easy access to these primary sources as well as exegetical works. The description of the building allows the reader to understand the spatial intimacy of these rooms and how the spectator might have experienced the

complex allegorical compositions expressing Christological themes. These first two parts of the book reveal a restricted public that was erudite and versed in a late sixteenth-century humanism in the viceroyalty of New Spain. A third element is introduced that triangulates the American relationship between the patron and the murals: the artists who painted them. They were the descendants of the Mexica *tlacuilos* (painters) who had been retrained, primarily by Franciscans, to paint in a blend of Northern and Southern Renaissance styles.

The last and main part of the book is an exquisite examination of the murals themselves. Morrill's detailed iconographic study demonstrates that the murals are original compositions created expressly for the house and are a complex mixing of various visual sources. Furthermore, Morrill analyzes the intricate relationship between the large figures of the Sibyls and the triumphal carts that progress across the walls in profile, and the smaller cityscapes that appear in the landscape background. It is as if one were looking at a pictorial fugue that expresses both universal themes through the large allegorical figures and local specificity through specific iconographic references. The final part of the book examines the appearance of pre-Hispanic motifs in the murals. They are almost all animals that appear in profile within cartouches. Many of them are New World creatures such as a coyote, coatimundi, javelina, and opossum. They all hold attributes such as musical instruments and vessels. They clearly have an emblematic role within the whole of the murals' program, which, as Morrill demonstrates, is dedicated to the celebration of the Feast of Corpus Christi.

This book joins with the growing number of other monographic studies of colonial Mexican art, such as Jeannette Peterson's *The Paradise Garden Murals of Malinalco* (1992). And like Peterson's book, Morrill's *The Casa del Deán* is a model of how such studies should be written.

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