

SYMBOLISM AND ICONOGRAPHY OF THE VICEROYAL MURAL PAINTING IN LIMA, 16TH AND 18TH CENTURIES

Carlos Guillermo Vargas Febres¹, Ana Torres Barchino², Juan Serra Lluch³

¹Department/School/Faculty, Universidad Autónoma del Perú,

²Department/School/Faculty, Universitat Politècnica de València, 46022 Valencia, Spain;

³Department/School/Faculty, Universitat Politècnica de València, 46022 Valencia, Spain ;

* Correspondence: cvargasfebres@hotmail.com; Tel.: +51-984767144

cvargasf1@autonoma.edu.pe¹

atorresb@ega.upv.es²

juaserl1@ega.upv.es³

Abstract: This study analyzes the symbolism and iconography of colonial mural painting in Lima between the 16th and 18th centuries, aiming to understand how these images functioned as visual tools for evangelization, theological pedagogy, and cultural affirmation. Using a qualitative methodology with an iconographic and iconological approach, selected murals in representative Lima temples were examined, employing classical theological sources and emblematic repertoires to interpret their meanings. The results reveal a complex symbolic architecture where Trinitarian doctrine, Baroque spirituality, and colonial power dynamics converge, highlighting the catechetical function and the ability of mural art to synthesize doctrinal, emotional, and cultural elements. European influences adapted to the local context are identified, along with syncretic elements that reflect the participation of Indigenous, Creole, and Afro-descendant communities in the visual configuration of faith. The conclusions assert that colonial mural painting in Lima was not merely an artistic reproduction but a means of symbolic articulation of the religious and social order, and that its study requires an interdisciplinary approach that recognizes its value as a visual testimony of colonial thought and as a fundamental part of Peruvian cultural heritage.

Keywords: Viceroyalty mural painting, Religious iconography, Limeño Baroque, Cultural syncretism, Visual evangelization.

1. Introduction

This study analyzes the symbolism and iconography of colonial mural painting in Lima between the 16th and 18th centuries, aiming to understand how these images functioned as visual tools for evangelization, theological pedagogy, and cultural affirmation. Using a qualitative methodology with an iconographic and iconological approach, selected murals in representative Lima temples were examined, employing classical theological sources and emblematic repertoires to interpret their meanings. The results reveal a complex symbolic architecture where Trinitarian doctrine, Baroque spirituality, and colonial power dynamics converge, highlighting the catechetical function and the ability of mural art to synthesize doctrinal, emotional, and cultural elements. European influences adapted to the local context are identified, along with syncretic elements that reflect the participation of Indigenous, Creole, and Afro-descendant communities in the visual configuration of faith. The conclusions assert that colonial mural painting in Lima was not merely an artistic reproduction but a means of symbolic articulation of the religious and social order, and that its study requires an interdisciplinary approach that recognizes its value as a visual testimony of colonial thought and as a fundamental part of Peruvian cultural heritage.

During that time, Lima became an important center for the creation of religious murals dedicated to evangelizing efforts, showcasing images that reflect complex cultural interactions. Despite its significance, it has received less attention compared to other regional schools, which complicates a full understanding of its symbolism and role within society (Gómez, 2021).

However, several recent studies are changing this historical oversight, providing new approaches to analyze the viceroymal art of Lima from iconographic, political, and faith perspectives. Holguín Valdez (2020) emphasizes that Lima's mural painting still has limited documentation, highlighting the Catalan painter Félix Batlle y Olivella, whose work, such as the Apotheosis of the Virgin Tota Pulchra, displays rich symbolism and an aesthetic that still needs to be thoroughly explored within the context of Lima in the late 18th century. Following this line, Gómez (2021) examines the devotion to the Virgin of Antigua as a "place of promotion"

that unites African religious practices and Catholic orthodoxy, revealing that even in Lima, religious painting served as a stage for processes of cultural mixing and symbolic dialogue between marginalized groups and the official ecclesiastical hierarchy.

Following a similar path of semiotic-religious interpretation, Mariazza (2002) examined the role of allegory in the pictorial art of the Peruvian colonial period. He emphasized how visual representations and their textual inscriptions served as means for teaching doctrine and encouraging morality. Funerary symbols, Marian emblems, and scenes of the end of the world were not mere decorations but powerful symbolic tools that conveyed the Christian message within a structured visual system. This persuasive power of colonial art is also evident in the research of Cohen Suarez (2013), who, based on the mural painting "Path of Heaven and Hell" in the church of Andahuaylillas, reveals the careful adaptation of these images to connect with the indigenous worldview, thereby facilitating the effective dissemination of Christian doctrine.

The iconographic examination demands historical precision. Alegría Sabogal (2019), for instance, provides a critical assessment of the iconography of the Trifacial Trinity, rejecting the notion that it is heretical and placing it within visually orthodox Baroque Catholicism. Such precisions are vital when studying images in colonial murals, whose abundant symbols have often been interpreted with preconceived ideas or unfounded assumptions. Likewise, Jessell and von Barghahn (1992) emphasize that it is crucial to connect iconographic studies with conservation, as many works have undergone alterations or damage that hinder the correct interpretation of their symbols and original structure. Their technical study offers a fundamental perspective for the comprehensive analysis of the mural paintings in Lima, where the very materiality communicates meaning.

To conclude, González's (2016) research on the visual representation of Inca monarchs in Lima provides an important interpretive framework for this text, highlighting how indigenous power groups used visual representations as instruments of political construction and cultural justification. This perspective is essential for understanding that Lima's mural painting was not merely a copy of colonial ideology, but also a dynamic visual space where various participants (clergy, natives, creoles, Africans) expressed their ambitions, beliefs, and identity conflicts through visual language.

From the 16th to the 18th centuries, wall painting in Lima, during the viceroyalty period, served as a tool for both education and the promotion of ideas. Through simple and colorful images, religious values and social norms were conveyed (De Lima & Metrópoli). In terms of technique, elements from Europe were combined with local materials, primarily using the fresco technique, although oil was also incorporated to achieve more complex light effects (Benítez Daporta, 2024). Natural pigments sourced from the Andes and valuable metals were used, applied to areas prepared with stucco or plaster, along with decorative methods such as sgraffito. This technical and aesthetic skill reveals a cultural fusion that gave rise to a unique colonial visual identity in the mural art of Lima.

In this context, the main objective of this study is to thoroughly explore the symbolism and iconography manifested in the mural painting of the viceroyalty period in Lima, from the 16th to the 18th century. To this end, an analysis is proposed that combines iconographic, theological, and sociocultural approaches. The aim is to investigate how these images, located both in the city and in the religious sites of Lima, functioned as tools for evangelization, influence, and ideological construction. Thus, the study aspires to uncover the complexity of their visual world, intimately connected with the dynamics of power and the religious convictions of the Peruvian Viceroyalty.

The ongoing study meticulously examines the paintings that adorn the walls of the San Francisco church in Lima. This specific example illustrates the art of the viceroyalty period, where the influence of European Baroque is blended with distinctive local features. The temple, built between 1546 and 1774, houses several murals. These creations stand out not only for their artistic value but also serve as visual documents that help us understand the prevailing worldview of that time.

The introduction should briefly place the study in a broad context and highlight why it is important. It should define the purpose of the work and its significance. The current state of the research field should be carefully reviewed and key publications cited. Please highlight controversial and diverging hypotheses when necessary. Finally, briefly mention the main aim of the work and highlight the principal conclusions. As far as

possible, please keep the introduction comprehensible to scientists outside your particular field of research. References should be numbered in order of appearance and indicated by a numeral or numerals in square brackets—e.g., [1] or [2,3], or [4–6]. See the end of the document for further details on references.

2. Materials and Methods

A qualitative perspective was implemented, thus facilitating the interpretation of the implicit meanings in the works; this involved examining not only the visual aspects but also the sociocultural environments that shaped their creation. To enrich this strategy, an iconographic analysis was conducted, focused on recognizing and organizing the visual symbols that appear in the frescoes, as well as discerning their significance within the colonial period. A case study was undertaken, concentrating on six frescoes that highlight the mural painting of the colonial era, with the selection based on the inherent relevance of each mural. This takes into account the location of the religious building where they are found; visits were made, along with photographic documentation and notes taken on-site.

A thorough analysis was conducted on a collection of six to eight murals, selected to represent the artistic production of religious sites in Lima during the 16th to 18th centuries. The aim was to include examples from different periods of the iconographic evolution and the religious thought characteristic of the viceroyalty era in Lima. Additionally, an effort was made to obtain a variety of themes (ranging from Marian representations to scenes of the end of the world, including allegories and Christological motifs) and artistic techniques. The murals were chosen considering their accessibility for visits, their good condition, and their significant meaning.

High-quality digital images were captured using a digital single-lens reflex (DSLR) camera. Photos were taken with side lighting to detect hidden details or retouches. Additionally, image processing software (Ihancer) was utilized, which is a digital enhancement tool that facilitates the visualization of barely perceptible strokes, pigments, and pictorial designs through the manipulation of color channels, following the method applied by Fuentes-Porto et al. (2020). The iconographic study was conducted following Erwin Panofsky's methodology, implementing a dual approach: descriptive iconography (identification of figures, characteristics, texts) and iconological analysis (interpretation of symbolic meaning within the theological, political, and cultural framework).

To unravel the theological meaning behind the representations of the divine, the allegories, and the Trinitarian symbols depicted in the murals, fundamental works such as the *Summa Theologica* by Saint Thomas Aquinas, the *Institutione Christianae Religionis* by John Calvin, and *De Trinitate* by Saint Augustine were consulted. Additionally, to understand how paintings were used in religious instruction, colonial catechisms aimed at educating the indigenous population (1584) and the *Doctrina Christiana* from the Third Lima Council (1583), which established doctrinal foundations, were examined. Furthermore, the hagiographies *Flos Sanctorum* by Pedro de la Vega and the *Golden Legend* by Santiago de la Vorágine, essential for the iconography of saints and martyrs, were key in recognizing gestures, attributes, and scenes of devotion in the viceroyal paintings of Lima. Lastly, the emblematic repertoires of Andrea Alciato and the *Iconology* of Cesare Ripa were consulted, which facilitated the identification of visual symbols represented by animals, objects, and gestures (Mariazza 2002, Alegría Sabogal 2019, and Plaza Roig 2023).

We delve into the analysis of images that manifest cultural fusion, particularly the integration of Andean motifs in Christian contexts. To achieve this, we apply methods of symbolic interpretation, recognizing signs, animals, plants, or narrative patterns that adapt religious principles to the local worldview, based on the studies of Cohen Suarez (2013), Guzmán et al. (2019), and Mardones Bravo (2016).

Additionally, we examined the influence of imagery on religious customs and its symbolic capacity to validate ecclesiastical or ethnic authority, as well as its adoption by various communities, as proposed by Brewer-García (2021), González (2016), and Gómez (2021). We studied representations of saints, virgins, Trinitarian concepts, scenes of the Last Judgment, and symbolic personifications (Virtues, Death, Vanitas, Militant Church), using a visual analysis perspective, following the line of Mariazza (2002).

3. Results

This section may be divided by subheadings. It should provide a concise and precise description of the experimental results, their interpretation, as well as the experimental conclusions that can be drawn.

3.1. Iconography and Symbolism of Colonial Mural Paintings in Lima

The case study was developed through the iconographic and symbolic analysis of mural paintings found in nine religious sites in Lima, which form a representative corpus of colonial mural art between the 16th and 18th centuries. The research included the Church of La Merced, the Sanctuary of Las Nazarenas, the Church of Santa Rosa de Lima, and the Convent of San Francisco, particularly the Chapel of the Miracle, featuring the scene of the Coronation of the Virgin by the Trinity. Similarly, the paintings of the Convent of Santo Domingo, the Church of Our Lady of Solitude, the Church of the Trinitarians, and the Convent of the Good Death were also examined.

3.1.1. Dome with Passion Angels (see figure 2)

- The iconographic analysis of the dome featuring Passion angels located in the Villegas Chapel of the La Merced church in Lima reveals a composition structured around a central axis of natural light, around which angelic figures are distributed, each holding instruments of Christ's Passion. Each angel bears one of the "Arma Christi," which include the cross, the crown of thorns, the nails, the whip, the sponge with vinegar, the lance, the hammer, and the column of flagellation. These figures exhibit a stylized anatomy and contained gestures, framed by a decoration of coffered ceilings and vegetal motifs that reinforce the celestial character of the scene. The compositional radially directs the viewer's gaze toward a symbolic focal point, where the natural illumination acquires a transcendent theological significance and configures a space for sacred contemplation.
- From the iconological interpretation, this arrangement of elements does not solely constitute a commemoration of Christ's suffering, but rather a theological representation of the redemptive sacrifice understood as a joint action of the Trinity; the light descending from the central oculus suggests the divine origin of the "salvific plan," while the angels do not function as spectators, but as liturgical actors who present to the faithful the glorified signs of martyrdom. The circular structure does not allude to a linear narrative movement but to a closed theological cosmology where each figure participates in a symbolic order that translates the mystery of redemption into images.
- From a theological perspective, the mural visually translates the trinitarian doctrine articulated by Saint Thomas Aquinas, who argues that God's external works correspond inseparably to the three divine persons; in this scene, although the Son symbolically occupies the visual center, the overhead illumination refers to the creator's action of the Father, and the harmonious arrangement of the figures suggests the vivifying operation of the Spirit. Saint Augustine, in his treatise on the Trinity, proposes that the soul knows God through an internal ascent that integrates memory, understanding, and love, a principle that is visualized here through the symbolic elevation of the instruments of the Passion. Meanwhile, Calvinist theology, which rejects anthropomorphic representations of the divine, would find in this work a legitimate visual language, where the image does not replace doctrine but rather guides the viewer towards its understanding, reaffirming the pedagogical value of sacred art in the viceroyalty culture of Lima.

3.1.2. Saint Michael the Archangel (See figure 3)

- The iconographic analysis of the mural of San Miguel Arcángel, located in the intrados of a vault in the colonial church of La Merced, allows us to identify a composition centered on a triumphant figure inscribed in a golden mandorla; San Miguel appears in a descending posture, clad in armor, plume, and breastplate, wielding a curved sword that symbolizes celestial authority; at his feet are naked demonic figures that reinforce the idea of evil subdued by divine justice. The compositional arrangement emphasizes theological hierarchy through tonal and directional contrasts that guide the gaze toward the central figure as the axis of moral and spiritual order.
- From an iconological perspective, the image should be understood as a representation of the eschatological judgment and the supremacy of the divine order over moral chaos; the armor shines as a symbol of spiritual purity, while the contained gesture of the archangel expresses a balance between authority and

mercy. The mandorla acts as a symbolic boundary between the human and the divine, establishing a sanctified space from which Saint Michael performs his role as mediator. This type of representation responds to the Counter-Reformation ideal that endows images with explicit doctrinal content, while also transforming them into instruments of visual pedagogy in the service of Catholic orthodoxy, legitimizing the instructive role of mural art in the viceroyalty context of Lima.

- From a theological perspective, Saint Michael is interpreted by Saint Thomas Aquinas as the prince of the celestial armies, tasked with preserving divine order against the forces of spiritual corruption. This scene illustrates this function as a visual representation of the Trinitarian action, where the angel executes divine will with justice and without error. For Saint Augustine, the defeated demon embodies not only an external entity but also the disordered passions of the soul that must be subdued by enlightened reason. Even from the Reformed viewpoint of John Calvin, this image stands as an instructive symbol, as it does not seek to represent God but to indicate His justice through signs that guide the faithful towards the truth contained in Scripture rather than in the figure itself.

3.1.3. Day of the Dead (See figure 4)

- Child figures interact directly with mortuary symbols such as human skulls and demonic masks. These representations, framed by vegetal ornamentation of Mannerist origin, employ the image of the naked putto as an ambiguous figure straddling the line between celestial innocence and eschatological awareness. The arrangement of the children holding or pointing at skulls, along with the inclusion of a hellish figure exhaling a vaporous stream towards one of them, introduces a visual rhetorical language loaded with moralizing intent.
- From an iconological perspective, these compositions form a coherent visual discourse aligned with the memento mori tradition aimed at underscoring the fragility of human life and the inevitability of eternal judgment. The child iconography does not represent life in its pure state but rather the latent awareness of the transcendent, creating a visual paradox where youth hold the emblem of death. This formal strategy, typical of the Counter-Reformation Baroque, seeks to provoke an introspective reaction in the parishioner, guiding them towards repentance and spiritual preparation.
- From a theological perspective, the scene can be interpreted through the ideas presented by Saint Thomas Aquinas, Saint Augustine, and, to a lesser extent, John Calvin. Thomistic doctrine recognizes death as a consequence of original sin and as a necessary transition toward the ultimate end of the soul, which gives the skull a more pedagogical character than a tragic one. Saint Augustine, in his reflection on memory and the soul, allows for the reading of the skull as a symbol of the awareness of limits, and children as images of the soul in its formative state, open to conversion. For Calvin, who accepts the use of symbols as long as they are subordinated to the Word, these images do not lead to idolatry but function as visible signs of an invisible truth—the urgency of repentance and the necessity of salvation—expressed in an iconography that instructs through moral contemplation.

3.1.4. Church of the Nazarenas (See figure 5)

- The mural image of the Lord of Miracles articulates iconographic elements of profound doctrinal resonance. At the center is the crucified Christ, with a body marked by signs of suffering, arms outstretched, and a tilted face that expresses redemption through suffering. To his left, the Virgin Mary appears in symbolic attire of spiritual royalty, while Saint John the Evangelist on the other side holds a cloth that emphasizes his role as a witness to the sacrifice. Above the cross, the inscription INRI is observed, accompanied by the figure of the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove, composing a scene of high theological content framed by an atmosphere of celestial twilight that suggests Golgotha.
- From an iconological reading, this representation transcends the devotional to express a theological-political model consistent with the baroque spirituality of the viceroyalty of Lima. The body of Christ stands as a sacrificial figure and symbol of the incarnate divine power, whose suffering legitimizes the ecclesial structure and the colonial order. The Virgin of Sorrows, as a spiritual mother, personifies the suffering and mediating Church, while the beloved disciple embodies the faithfulness of the believer in the face of the paschal mystery. The centrality of the cross, reinforced by the vertical compositional axis

and the directed illumination towards Christ's face, transforms the mural into a visual device that symbolically organizes the liturgy of pain as a path to glory, articulating a theological message that integrates devotion, ecclesial authority, and spiritual communion.

- From a theological perspective, this mural painting can be understood as a visual synthesis of Christian redemption in light of the fundamental doctrines of Saint Thomas Aquinas, Saint Augustine, and John Calvin. For Thomas, the sacrifice on the cross represents the supreme act of obedience and love, a tangible expression of the eternal plan of salvation, while Augustine sees in the cross the revelation of the Trinity acting as a unity of love between Father, Son, and Spirit, whose presence is visualized in the dove above the cross; although Calvin rejects the devotional use of images, he acknowledges their instructive function, and this work, within the context of the Counter-Reformation in Lima, becomes a visual catechesis that mobilizes the viewer's emotions towards the contemplation of the Paschal mystery.

3.1.5. Geometric ornamental motif with Trinitarian symbolism (East Wall, Church of Santa Rosa de Lima) See figure 6

- The iconographic analysis of the mural fragment reveals a complex geometric arrangement composed of diagonal stripes, gridded patterns, inscribed circles, and alternating triangles in shades of red and ochre, along with an upper band of circular floral motifs; this organization adheres to a principle of axial symmetry that provides visual order to the wall, reinforcing its sanctified character. The Panofskian reading allows for the identification of a structured program of ascending interpretation, in which the geometric forms not only serve a decorative function but also respond to a symbolic system that alludes to spiritual harmony; the presence of deteriorated dark pigments at the base suggests a lost figurative plane, whose absence does not hinder the activation of theological meaning through the remaining composition.

- From the iconological approach, the use of pure geometric figures such as circles, squares, and triangles respond to a symbolic tradition that associates these shapes with higher spiritual realities. The circle refers to divine eternity, the square to earthly finitude, and the triangle, hinted at in the alternating modules, to the trinitarian mystery. This ordered and repetitive arrangement constructs a visual metaphor of the cosmic order and the presence of the Logos in creation; geometry here does not represent the abstract, but the intelligible, in the manner of a visual catechesis that expresses in images the theological structure of the universe. Each shape acts as a sign that connects the visible with the invisible, integrating the sensory experience of the viewer within a spiritual reflection on the perfection and unity of God.

- The theological interpretation based on the doctrines of Thomas Aquinas, Saint Augustine, and John Calvin allows us to understand this mural as a visual synthesis of Christian thought on order, unity, and revelation; for Aquinas, formal clarity and number express the wisdom of God present in creation, while Augustine sees in the repeated forms a sensible analogy of the Trinitarian mystery where the multiple does not contradict the unity; from the Calvinist perspective that rejects figurative imagery as a means of devotion, this geometric composition gains legitimacy by not directly representing the divine, but suggesting it through proportions and abstractions that invite contemplation; this mural should be understood as a visual device of a mystical nature, aimed at shaping the believer's gaze through order and beauty, principles inscribed in the viceregal spirituality of Baroque Lima.

3.1.6. Mural on Supér Unda Street of the Church of Santa Rosa de Lima (See figure 7)

- The mural painting that covers the rear facade of the Church of Santa Rosa de Lima features a compositional design based on repeated modules that integrate stylized floral elements within geometric frames. Through the iconographic analysis proposed by Erwin Panofsky, an organized structure is identified in regular bands with a predominance of axial symmetry and a decorative sequence arranged in horizontal registers. Each panel contains a central vegetal motif such as lilies or thistles, accompanied by scrolls, curved stems, and arabesques that reinforce the Baroque stylization. This arrangement reveals a conception of the wall as a unified and rhythmic surface where decoration becomes a structuring form, linking the aesthetic with the symbolic within the visual program of the Lima temple.

- In the iconological plane, the vegetal ornamentation acquires a symbolic dimension that refers to the spiritual garden, a recurring figure in Christian mysticism as an image of the soul in grace. The repetition

of flowers is associated with virtuous life, particularly with the figure of Saint Rose of Lima, whose iconography was marked by floral attributes that exalt her virginity, penance, and consecration. This visual rhetoric transforms the façade into an intermediary space between the everyday and the sacred, articulating a spiritual message through codes accessible to the faithful. Far from being limited to an ornamental function, the ensemble operates as a device for the public exaltation of holiness, projecting a symbolic order onto the urban environment that reinforces the sacredness of the building and guides the devotional experience of the passerby.

- From a theological perspective, mural decoration responds to doctrinal principles derived from the thoughts of Thomas Aquinas, St. Augustine, and John Calvin, where the ordered beauty of the whole is, for the Thomistic tradition, a visible reflection of divine wisdom. For Augustine, the floral multiplicity refers to God's creative unity, where all diversity finds its origin in a common source, although Calvin acknowledges its pedagogical use when it does not replace the Word. In this Limeño context, mural ornamentation acts as a symbolic threshold that does not replace the doctrinal message but visually frames it, introducing the faithful into an aesthetic experience directed towards the contemplation of divine order and the recognition of the Christian virtue manifested in the figure of Lima's patron saint.

3.1.7. Mural Painting of The Lamentation in the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Solitude (See figure 8)

- In the mural scene, a complex composition is presented that articulates the sculpture of the recumbent Christ with a mural painting depicting the Virgin Mary, Saint John the Evangelist, and other mourning figures. From the iconographic perspective of Erwin Panofsky, a scenic organization is recognized that places the Virgin at the center, adorned in austere garments and expressing a gesture of introspection, while the dejected Saint John holds a handkerchief as a sign of mourning. The integration between the three-dimensionality of the sculpture and the pictorial plane generates an intensely expressive unified scene that directs the viewer's attention to the body of Christ, whose anatomy shows in detail the marks of the Passion, establishing an immediate visual and emotional connection.

- From the iconological analysis, this arrangement responds to the devotional model of the Descent and the Pietà, aimed at provoking an experience of compassionate accompaniment. The theatricality of the scene, characteristic of the viceregal Baroque, reinforces the affective dimension of the image as a catechetical resource, placing the viewer in a liminal space between liturgical mourning and spiritual contemplation. This visual configuration aligns with the principles of the Counter-Reformation, which promoted the doctrinal efficacy of the image through emotion, drama, and the sensitive identification of the faithful Christ.

- From a theological perspective, the dead Christ symbolizes the supreme act of redemptive love of the incarnate Word, whose contemplation elevates the believer from the sensible to the understanding of the Trinitarian mystery; for Aquinas, the dead body of Christ is a visible sign of a salvific economy that transcends the historical and operates within the living liturgy of the Church. Augustine interprets this moment as an expression of divine emptiness, where the silence of the Son reveals the Father who gives and the Spirit who comforts. Even from Calvin's Reformed critique of the use of images, this scene does not replace the Word but acts as an aesthetic mediation that guides the viewer towards an affective and doctrinal understanding of the sacrifice. In this context, the mural functions as a visual architecture of faith, in which suffering is both a symbol and pedagogy of divine love.

3.1.8. Coronation of the Virgin Mary by the Holy Trinity from the 18th century (See figure 9)

- The mural of the Coronation of the Virgin Mary by the Holy Trinity presents a visual structure centered on an ascendant scene of profound theological significance. From the iconographic approach proposed by Erwin Panofsky, a central arrangement is identified in which Mary is elevated by angels, flanked by God the Father and God the Son, who together hold the cross while the Holy Spirit, in the form of a dove, descends from above. The celestial environment populated by lesser angels and the presence of Franciscan saints at the ends reinforce a glorifying atmosphere in which symmetry, radiant light, and devotional solemnity converge.

- From the iconological analysis, this image is inscribed in the tradition of the Heavenly Coronation widely disseminated in Counter-Reformation art as a visual affirmation of the Marian dogma. The articulation of the three divine persons as co-crowners expresses the unity of the Trinity, while the exaltation of Mary as co-redeemer does not stem from her own merits but from the grace received within the framework of salvific economy; the cross held at the center underscores the connection between Marian glorification and the redemptive sacrifice of Christ.
 - From the theological perspective, the scene finds its foundation in the Summa Theologica of Saint Thomas Aquinas, in which the Trinity operates jointly and inseparably in external actions, including glorification; the vertical disposition and luminous irradiation refer to the participation of each divine person in the crowning as an expression of eternal love. Saint Augustine, in his work De Trinitate, proposes that the soul knows God through the triune image inscribed within itself, which is represented here in the figure of Mary as a purified soul ascending towards the encounter with glory; even from the perspective of John Calvin, who criticizes the idolatry of images, this mural does not replace the Word, but rather connects the trinitarian mystery through signs that lead to the revealed truth.
- 3.1.9. Hagiographic and visionary trinitarian cycle in the Church of the Trinitarians. (See figure 10)
- The murals represent a visual narrative centered on the exaltation of the Trinitarian Order through scenes where friars and female figures partake in supernatural manifestations; from an iconographic perspective according to Erwin Panofsky's approach, representations are identified that commonly integrate the trinitarian symbol of the red and blue cross on a white background, associated with the redemptive charisma of the order; the friars appear in contemplative or ecstatic attitudes receiving heavenly gifts from angelic figures, while the landscapes of clouds, orbs of light, and devotional gestures reinforce the idea of divine intervention.
 - In the iconological plane, the scenes should be interpreted as allegories of Trinitarian mediation in the consecrated soul and as theological validations of the redemptive role of the Order in the viceroyalty of Lima. The mystical visions and the reception of celestial symbols such as the crown or light reflect the appropriation of a model of holiness based on obedience, humility, and intercession, consistent with Baroque spirituality. The supernatural character of these scenes does not stem from devotional fantasy but is part of a visual language designed to express complex doctrines through tangible images. The use of celestial illumination and direct interaction with angelic figures positions the Trinitarian friar not merely as a recipient of grace but as an active subject within a spiritual economy of redemption and communion.
- 3.1.10. Mural Painting in the Convent of the Good Death (See figure 11)
- The collection of mural paintings located on the ceiling of the Convent of the Good Death in Lima represents one of the most sophisticated examples of viceroyalty Baroque in Lima, articulating an iconographic program that combines the allegorical, the doctrinal, and the eschatological through a highly coded visual language. From the methodological perspective of Erwin Panofsky, at the descriptive iconographic level, a series of oval medallions containing human faces, symbolic inscriptions, Gothic letters, and angelic allegories can be recognized, arranged within a decorative structure that includes vegetal garlands, cartouches, and masks. The main vault displays a radiant cross at its center, flanked by instruments of the Passion, while winged figures hold Christological attributes. Along the perimeter, heraldic shields, faces of Christ, symbols of death, and idealized human figures are interspersed, creating a visual narrative that extends from the presbytery to the lateral extremes, marking an axis of ascending contemplation.
 - At an iconological level, these images compose a visual discourse on redemption and the preparation of the soul for the final transition, in accordance with the charism of the Congregation of the Good Death, dedicated to spiritual assistance in the last moments of life. The reiteration of mortuary symbols alongside faces of Christ and letters such as "I" or "M," possibly initials of Marian or Christological concepts, indicates a structure for meditation on individual salvation, the final judgment, and the Trinitarian communion as the ultimate destination of the soul. The symmetrical and centrifugal arrangement of the

medallions not only organizes the space of the vault but also constructs a worldview where the celestial order is reflected in the symbolic architecture of the temple.

- Since the scholastic theology of Saint Thomas Aquinas, the vault can be read as a sensible expression of the divine order inscribed in creation, where each figure represents an aspect of theological knowledge accessible to the human intellect through faith illuminated by grace. The centrality of the cross and the sequence of symbols of the Passion reaffirm the Thomistic principle that redemption operates through the mediation of the incarnate Word, in whose death divine justice and mercy are manifested. For Saint Augustine, the soul that contemplates these images is led by memory and intelligence towards trinitarian love, as the harmonious arrangement of signs and forms induces introspection about eternal life. Regarding the Calvinist stance, which is distrustful of images but admits their instructive function when subordinated to Scripture, this mural ensemble does not transgress the principle of idolatry, as it does not represent the divine in a literal sense but allegorically, directing the viewer towards the mystery of salvation without substituting the revealed truth.

3.1.11. Murals of the Convent of Santo Domingo (See figure 12)

- The first mural analyzed depicts the image of Christ as a man of sorrows, crowned with thorns, with a melancholic gaze and a bare torso, surrounded by a somber atmosphere that contrasts with the intense coloration of his scarlet mantle. From the iconographic perspective of Panofsky, it can be identified as a representation of *Ecce Homo*, a devotional formula that emphasizes Christ's suffering humanity. The composition clearly demonstrates an understanding of late medieval European models, adapted to a viceregal context where redemptive pain becomes a catechetical resource. At the iconological level, this image was conceived to generate emotional empathy and spiritual shock among the faithful of Lima, thereby reinforcing the central message of Christian sacrifice in a deeply hierarchical society where Christ's suffering legitimized the sacramental order and promoted obedience as a virtue.

- From the second interpretive approach, and drawing on the doctrine of redemption according to the *Summa Theologica*, this suffering Christ reveals the theological dimension of vicarious atonement. The blood, not represented but implicit in his gesture and posture, alludes to the sacrifice as the fulfillment of divine love towards fallen humanity, in a logic that transcends human retributive justice. This view is reinforced by Augustine's theology of grace, where the passive, humiliated, and suffering Christ does not act merely as a martyr but as the incarnate Word who, through his humility, becomes a channel of redemption. From the Reformed perspective of Calvin, it could also be seen as a call to inner contemplation and radical repentance of the believer, for the face of Christ does not demand aesthetic veneration but an ethical transformation of the soul.

- The second mural depicts a scene of the Annunciation, where the Virgin Mary, dressed in a red tunic and a bluish-green mantle, receives the greeting of the archangel Gabriel, who solemnly points upwards. In a scenographic arrangement with clear Renaissance influence, elements typical of Panofsky's iconography are recognized here: the reverent gesture of the Virgin, the graceful movement of the angel, as well as an architectural background that alludes to the eternal manifested in the everyday. This painting visually translates a liminal moment in the history of salvation, where the divine breaks into history; iconologically, this mural expresses the theology of the Incarnation as a foundational mystery of Christianity, presented in an accessible yet profound manner to a colonial audience that associated Mary's virginity with the purity of the Church and the ideal obedience of women in the viceregal system.

- In light of *De Trinitate*, the scene of the Annunciation takes on greater symbolic richness by involving a trinitarian operation: The Father who sends, the Holy Spirit who conceives, and the Son who becomes incarnate. Mary thus becomes a typological figure of the Church, a model of availability to grace. Mary's perpetual virginity, confirmed in her dialogue with the angel, alludes to the mystery of the incarnation without corruption, resonating with the Thomistic thesis that the supernatural does not destroy but perfects nature; for Calvin, although veneration of Mary should be avoided, the moment of the Annunciation remained crucial, as it testified to God's absolute sovereignty in His choice of humble instruments for the realization of the divine plan.

- In the third mural, there is an image of the Virgin of Sorrows, with her hands crossed over her chest, her gaze fixed on the viewer, and an expression that embodies inner anguish. This painting is part of the iconography of the Stabat Mater, where Mary appears in her role as a silent co-redeemer at the foot of the cross. Descriptively, the iconographic elements highlight her profound sorrow and the chromatic intensity of the Marian blue, a symbol of fidelity and hope, in contrast to the dark background that conveys a sense of mourning. From an iconological perspective, this image expresses the spiritualization of maternal suffering as an archetype of colonial popular piety, where the Virgin's pain serves as a mirror for the everyday suffering of a society marked by inequality, mourning, and hope for eternal life. Theologically, according to St. Thomas, Mary participates uniquely in the Passion of Christ not as an efficient cause, but as a voluntary collaborator in the mystery of redemption, which gives salvific meaning to her suffering. The image presents her in a moment of inner contemplation, not despair, consistent with the Augustinian view that pain accepted in faith can lead to a deeper union with God. Even from Calvin's Reformed critique of Marian intercession, this image could be understood as an allegorical representation of the faithful soul that, amidst suffering, remains united to the divine will. The mural not only evokes Mary's maternal figure but also proposes a spiritual model of serene resistance and silent faith, deeply necessary in a context like colonial Lima, where physical and social pain demanded transcendent consolation.

3.2. Figures, Tables and Schemes

3.2.1 **Figure 1**, Process of photographic registration with a digital single-lens reflex camera (DSLR)



3.2.2 **Figure 2**, *Dome with Passion Angels*



3.2.3. **Figure 3**, Saint Michael the Archangel



3.2.4. Figure 4, Day of the Dead



3.2.5. Figure 5, Church of the Nazarenas



3.2.6. Figure 6, Geometric ornamental motif with Trinitarian symbolism (East Wall, Church of Santa Ro-sa de Lima)



3.2.7. Figure 7, Mural on Supér Unda Street of the Church of Santa Rosa de Lima



3.2.8. Figure 8, Mural Painting of The Lamentation in the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Solitude



3.2.9. Figure 9, Coronation of the Virgin Mary by the Holy Trinity from the 18th century



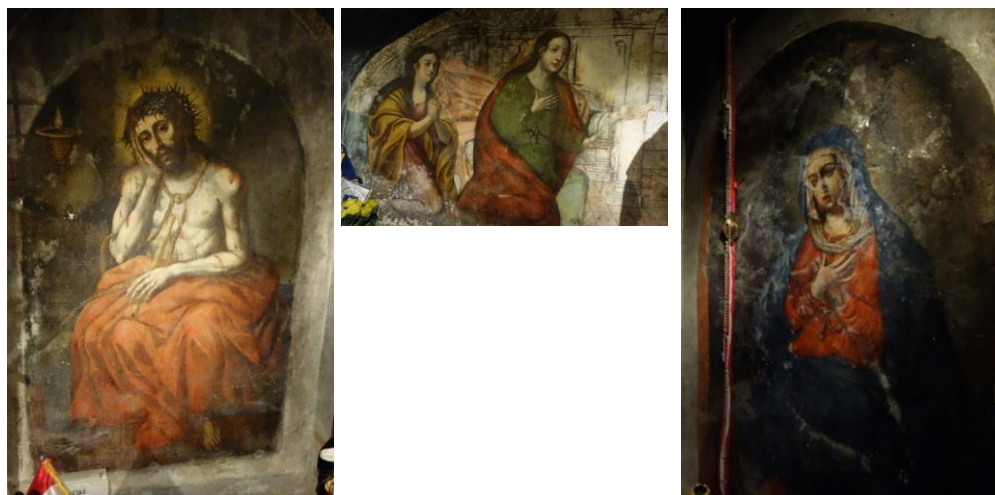
3.2.10. Figure 10, Hagiographic and visionary trinitarian cycle in the Church of the Trinitarians



3.2.11. Figure 11, Mural Painting in the Convent of the Good Death



3.2.12. Figure 12,



4. Discussion

The iconographic and symbolic analysis of the viceregal murals of Lima, developed using Panofsky's methodology and theological patristic and scholastic sources, reveals a complex visual and doctrinal structure that goes beyond mere ornamental function. The results of this study demonstrate a clear pedagogical intent, where each mural image serves as an instrument of catechesis and contemplation, deeply intertwined with the doctrinal foundations of Trinitarian Christianity. This articulation is powerfully manifested in examples such as the dome with passion angels in the Church of La Merced, where the symbols of the Passion are liturgically elevated to form a visual system for contemplating the Trinitarian mystery. This visual interpretation aligns

with the research of Mariazza (2002) and Alegría Sabogal (2019), who argue that colonial images function as structured forms of religious knowledge rather than as mere narrative illustrations.

Compared to previous studies on Andean mural painting, such as those by Guzmán et al. (2019) in Cuzco, the murals of Lima reveal a greater theological elaboration in their compositional distribution and in the symbolic density of the signs used. While in the highlands the image is intensely linked to local ritual and indigenous worldview, in Lima the visual resources seem aimed at reinforcing the dogmatic foundations of Catholicism, while still incorporating syncretic elements. The mural of Cristo Moreno in the Sanctuary of Las Nazarenas exemplifies this tension, as it synthesizes the Christological representation with components that evoke Afro-descendant religious practices, as noted by Gómez (2021). This phenomenon demonstrates that, although the didactic and orthodox purpose remains dominant, mural art in Lima was permeated by subaltern cultural forms that enriched its significance.

In relation to the ornamental and geometric representations, such as those found in the Church of Santa Rosa de Lima, the study confirms the hypothesis that even the most abstract elements of the viceregal decoration respond to a structured symbolic code. This finding aligns with the assertions made by Cohen Suarez (2013) and Mardones Bravo (2016), who emphasize that geometry and visual abstraction in colonial sacred spaces should not be interpreted as mere decoration, but as symbolic translations of the structure of the cosmos and divine order. In this context, the repeated use of triangular patterns and grids is part of a coded visual language aimed at guiding the viewer towards a spiritual understanding of the dogma, particularly the trinitarian mystery, in a visual logic akin to the Neoplatonic tradition that permeates Thomistic scholasticism.

Another revealing aspect of this research is the construction of an institutional iconography linked to specific religious orders, such as the Trinitarian Order. The paintings found in the Church of the Trinitarians offer a visual narrative that legitimizes their mediating and saving role, projecting a spirituality based on intercession and grace. This visibility aligns with Brewer-García's (2021) proposal regarding how images become spaces for identity affirmation and expression of ecclesiastical authority. In this sense, the iconography not only consolidates dogmas but also constructs visual discourses of belonging and power, adapting to the pastoral and political needs of each religious community within the urban framework of Lima.

Finally, the contrast between the dramatic body imagery, such as that of the recumbent Christ in the Sanctuary of Solitude, and the ornamental geometric compositions highlights the versatility of colonial mural art in Lima to appeal to both the intellect and emotion. The coexistence of these two iconographic strategies reflects what Jessell and von Barghahn (1992) noted, in that the colonial image was simultaneously a bearer of doctrine and a catalyst for spiritual experience. This versatility confirms that Lima's mural painting, far from being a stylistic copy of European models, was a unique visual formulation, rich in multiple meanings, that responded to the doctrinal, affective, and cultural complexity of the colonial world. This research, by bringing together visual, theological, and cultural analysis, allows us to assert that these murals constitute not only artistic vestiges but also true symbolic architectures of colonial thought in Lima.

5. Conclusions

The study of colonial mural painting in Lima, from the 16th to the 18th centuries, has allowed for the recognition of a visual language deeply intertwined with Christian doctrine, colonial social dynamics, and the sensibilities of the viceregal world. Each analyzed mural expresses a precise catechetical intention, where color, form, and the arrangement of symbols do not respond to a mere aesthetic impulse but serve a spiritual pedagogy aimed at contemplation, conversion, and the doctrinal edification of the viewer. Through the religious iconography displayed in Lima's temples, a worldview is revealed in which the visible constitutes a pathway to the transcendent and where the wall becomes a support for theological truth and moral instruction.

The findings of this research demonstrate that the colonial mural painting in Lima was not a marginal artistic manifestation, but rather a carefully structured visual system created by theologians, artists, and religious orders who found in the image a privileged means to communicate complex concepts and invisible realities. Contrary to what has been argued in certain reductionist approaches, these works do not represent a mere imitation of European art, but rather a visual reworking that incorporates local elements, indigenous materials, and symbolic codes that engage with popular religiosity and Andean cultural imaginaries. As

documented examples show, Lima's mural painting was capable of synthesizing the doctrinal with the emotional, the ornamental with the eschatological, and the institutional with the mystical.

This work also confirms that the colonial mural art of Lima developed as a symbolic architecture aimed at sustaining ecclesiastical order, consolidating collective identities, and proposing models of virtue through the exaltation of figures such as the Virgin, the Trinitarian saints, or Christian martyrs. In this process, the image becomes a visible word that teaches, exhorts, and persuades, shaping spaces of theological contemplation where Baroque aesthetics, Trinitarian theology, and catechetical sensitivity converge. Each scene, each gesture, and each visual sign must be understood within the framework of a visual culture that does not separate devotion from doctrine or beauty from thought.

Research demonstrates, therefore, that the iconographic and iconological study of these murals requires an interdisciplinary reading that articulates art history, theology, and cultural anthropology. This perspective allows us to understand how these works, far from being mere silent witnesses of the past, continue to provide keys for understanding the symbolic configuration of colonial Lima and its projection in the visual identity of contemporary Peru. Preserving, interpreting, and disseminating this legacy is not merely an act of heritage preservation but an opportunity to restore to these images their spiritual depth, intellectual density, and transformative capacity within the collective imagination.

AuthorContributions: Conceptualization, Carlos Guillermo Vargas Febres and Ana Torres Barchino; methodology, Carlos Guillermo Vargas Febres; software, Carlos Guillermo Vargas Febres; validation, Carlos Guillermo Vargas Febres, Ana Torres Barchino and Juan Serra Lluch; formal analysis, Carlos Guillermo Vargas Febres; investigation, Carlos Guillermo Vargas Febres; resources, Ana Torres Barchino; data curation, Carlos Guillermo Vargas Febres; writing—original draft preparation, Carlos Guillermo Vargas Febres; writing—review and editing, Ana Torres Barchino and Juan Serra Lluch; visualization, Carlos Guillermo Vargas Febres; supervision, Ana Torres Barchino and Juan Serra Lluch; projectadministration, Ana Torres Barchino; fundingacquisition, Juan Serra Lluch. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: Please add: This research was funded by Universidad Autónoma del Perú.

Data Availability Statement:We encourage all authors of articles published in MDPI journals to share their research data. In this section, please provide details regarding where data supporting reported results can be found, including links to publicly archived datasets analyzed or generated during the study. Where no new data were created, or where data is unavailable due to privacy or ethical restrictions, a statement is still required. Suggested Data Availability Statements are available in section “MDPI Research Data Policies” at <https://www.mdpi.com/ethics>.

Acknowledgments:The authors express their sincere gratitude to Dr. Luis Fernando Garcés and Mgt. David García for their valuable methodological guidance and critical insights, which contributed significantly to the development and refinement of this research. Their academic generosity and commitment to interdisciplinary collaboration enriched the analytical framework of this study. The authors also thank the institutions that facilitated access to historical and visual documentation during the fieldwork phases, which were essential for the iconographic analysis presented in this article.

Conflicts of Interest:The authors declare no conflicts of interest. The funders had no role in the design of the study; in the collection, analyses, or interpretation of data; in the writing of the manuscript; or in the decision to publish the results.

References

1. Alegría Sabogal, J.G. Trinidad trifacial: Fuentes grabadas y problemas historiográficos. *ILLAPA Maná Tukukuq* 2019, 16(16), 78–85.
2. Benítez Daporta, J. Técnicas y materiales en la pintura mural virreinal limeña: Aproximaciones técnicas y simbólicas; Instituto de Patrimonio y Arte Colonial: Lima, Perú, 2024.

3. Brewer-García, L. El pardo compuesto de la Lima del siglo XVII: Negritud, blancura y autoconformación criolla en los primeros retratos de Martín de Porres. *Colon. Lat. Am. Rev.* 2021, 30(2), 272–304. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10609164.2021.1912485>
4. Cohen Suarez, A. Pintura liminalidades andinas en la Iglesia de Andahuaylillas, Cuzco, Perú. *Colon. Lat. Am. Rev.* 2013, 22(3), 369–399. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10609164.2013.851323>
5. De la Rosa, J.M.G. La pintura de castas como emblema y símbolo del barroco virreinal: Revisión y valoración historiográfica. *Emblemata: Rev. Aragonesa de Emblemática* 2024. Available online: <https://www.dpz.es> (accessed on [insert date]).
6. De Lima, R.; Metrópoli, V. Color, forma y fe: Una lectura material y simbólica de los murales limeños; Museo de Arte Colonial del Perú: Lima, Perú, 2024.
7. Fuentes-Porto, J.; Muñoz, A.; Díaz, L. Enhanced image analysis in heritage studies: The use of DStretch software for mural visibility improvement. *J. Herit. Sci.* 2020, 8, 55. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40494-020-00407-w>
8. Gil, J.S.; Noa, L.C. Atribución de una pintura a Mateo Pérez de Alesio en Lima. *Arch. Esp. Arte* 2024, 97(387), 1376–1376. <https://www.csic.es>
9. Gómez, X.A. De la ira a la imagen: La Virgen de la Antigua como espacio de correlación en la Lima del siglo XVII. *Colon. Lat. Am. Rev.* 2021, 30(2), 214–237. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10609164.2021.1912482>
10. González, S. Escritura de la historia prehispánica en el Perú virreinal: La iconografía dinástica de los reyes incas. *Hist. Humanid.* 2016, 1(2), 231–249. <https://doi.org/10.1086/687918>
11. Guzmán, F.; Barros, J.; Corti, P.; Pereira, M. El rito bautismal y las imágenes pintadas en la iglesia de Curahuara de Carangas. *Colon. Lat. Am. Rev.* 2019, 28(1), 81–105. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10609164.2019.1585084>
12. Holguín Valdez, A. Un pintor catalán en Lima virreinal: Félix Batlle y Olivella (1796–1812). *ILLAPA Maná Tukukuq* 2020, 17(17), 98–109.
13. Jessell, B.; vonBarghahn, B. La conservación e iconografía de la pintura y la escultura virreinales: Viejos problemas y nuevos enfoques. *Stud. Conserv.* 1992, 37(sup1), 76–80. <https://doi.org/10.1179/sic.1992.37.s1.016>
14. Mariazza, J. Las imágenes alegóricas y sus textos en la pintura virreinal; Author's edition: Lima, Perú, 2002.
15. Mardones Bravo, M. Cristianismo visual e imaginarios andinos: Iconografía y apropiación en el arte colonial; Ediciones Universidad Católica de Chile: Santiago, Chile, 2016.
16. Plaza Roig, A. Nuestra Señora de la Almudena con donantes: Un caso de ambigüedad iconográfica en el Virreinato del Perú. *Rev. Arte Colonial* 2023, 19(1), 52–68.