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# Some Arborescent Motifs in Architectural Reliefs: Augustinian Convent Heritage in Colonial America

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## Abstract

The present study focuses on specific ornamental pictorial evidence, which has remained hidden for centuries, in a 17<sup>th</sup> century convent complex, in Salamanca, Mexico. Thus, this research aims at describing specific contextual periods of the estate of the convent in which it is housed and estimates the influence of grotesque pictorial style and its meaning during the period of Viceroyalty of New Spain. For this purpose, we recognise specific ornaments of the style for a formal compositional analysis and uncover references to some plant species which inspired the cultural iconographic traits of the region in that historical frame. Conceptually, we reviewed the communication of ideas based on nature of the *grotesco* (grotesque) aesthetics, and the adoption of this style by Hispanic friars to design the spatial environment of the New Spain convents. I adopt a qualitative methodology to describe five ornamental units, two corresponding to the nave of a temple and three dedicated to its main cloister. We identified ornamental structures that were visually motivated mainly by certain plant species. In short, this study proposes an emerging approach to artistic heritage conservation by unveiling evidence indeterminately lost in time and hidden in the changing architectural needs of an evolving society.

**Keywords:** pictorial heritage, plant ornament, grotesque, composition.

## Introduction

This study reveals the pictorial-mural and ornamental aesthetics of an Augustinian convent complex of the Guanajuato Bajío region, one whose foundation dates back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century architectures of urban locations in New Spain. The specific building we have in mind is known as the Viceregal Villa de Salamanca. Over time, some murals on the theme of the European grotesque inspiration got erased from the nave of this temple structure. The murals got overlaid with baroque altarpieces that were built in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and by other ornamental additions or modifications in the cells' walls. The latter changes were a result of reparations during a period of changing social tastes. T

The objectives of the present study are:

1. To describe different phases of the heritage building; the origin and the artistic transformation of the primitive Baroque walls, that resulted from the architectural interventions the Augustinian Convent at Salamanca and the aesthetics that guided the restoration of this colonial art at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.
2. To appreciate the *grotesque* pictorial expression as a universal artistic style emerging from postures and concepts in plants, and schematic rock art posture, and thoughtful

relief ornaments, and thus to understand what meaning these patterns had and how they were transferred to colonial New Spain.

3. To identify specific ornamental reliefs incorporating plant motifs on the building complex, which, owing to their visible physical orientation help to exemplify the influence of the grotesque.
4. To analyse the principles of composition in selected paintings and analyse the configuration and formal interrelation in the visual fields.
5. To demonstrate ornamental patterns as interrelated with the anatomical configurations of plant species and to establish that a study of such patterns may offer theme for future research in iconographic symbology

### Periods of the religious site

The architectural complex of the Augustinian convent at Salamanca, including the temple of Fray Juan de Sahagún and the major and minor cloisters, was founded in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Citing the historian Fray Nicolas Navarrete, art critic De Santiago (2004, p. 195) describes the humble original hermitage, with earthen walls and tiled roof. The building that can now be seen evolves from work begun, as previously stated, in 1642, when Fray Miguel de Guevara, an emerging Prior, was sent in a last-ditch effort to prevent the foreclosure of the destitute house of friars at Salamanca, Mexico.



**Figure 1. Interior view of the courtyard of the main Augustinian cloister; note the austerity of the Herrerian style where the wall dominates the space. Today, the Guanajuato Arts Center, is highly influential in Mexico. Photograph by the author (2021).**

The Deed of Trust document for the building is preserved at the Historical Archive of Querétaro, an adjacent city. The Deed states the following:

Since 1768, the sculptor Pedro de Rojas is known to have been hired to execute the altarpiece .... the other altarpiece artist from Salamanca, Antonio de Elexalde, *el Joven*, began the altarpieces on January 7, 1771, who was supported by a team of five officers, and completed his work on August 28, 1782, [...] (Ibid, p. 171).



**Figure 2. An example of a side altar, that of the *Tribuna-Celosía* [Tribune-Latticework]; note the churrigueresque style of dynamic and motley ornamentation. The wall behind the altar shows pictorial evidence of plant ornamentation. Photograph by the author (2021).**

In accordance with the above, and at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the civil association, which promotes the rescue and conservation of artistic heritage in Mexico, ordered and administered the architectural restoration project of the main cloister of this Augustinian convent and especially of eleven related baroque altarpieces of the temple (Castro Morales, 2000, pp. 14-15). The restoration works freed areas later overlaid by different constructions of the Government, especially offices at the service of society, which had concurrently decreased the custody of the property of Augustinian friars in later years. As described by Rojas (Rojas Garcidueñas, 2014, p. 106):

Almost at the beginning of 1858, the convent suffered the first direct blow of the war... In the following year, the difficulties were already insurmountable, and in 1860, when the war ended with the triumph of the Liberals and when the 1857 Constitution and the Reform Laws came into force, the Augustinian convent was decommissioned.

The building became a state penitentiary with the following activities recommended for inmates:

[...] the convent would be the main penal institution of the State, and its system would be mixed; that is, the prisoners are subjected to complete isolation, without working, and as their behaviour and moral conduct is qualified, join work, they constantly rotate between workshops and remain in complete silence (Ibid, p. 142).

Consequently, necessary architectural modifications were introduced, and the walls of the complex were completed to ensure security and isolation for the prison and to prevent distraction of the inmates.



**Figure 3. One of the corridors of the main cloister, used as a State Prison at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Common domain photography, consulted in *Salamanca En FOTOS* [Salamanca In PHOTOGRAPHS] (Hernández Flores, 2020).**

### **Plant Arborescent Designs in Pictorial Art**

Natural objects were depicted to communicate ideas and thoughts. Examples date back to antiquity, specifically schematic cave paintings contain elements that were made by contextualising social groups and highlight typologies with anthropomorphic, zoomorphic and ramiform representations for idols (Bernal Monreal & Mateo Saura, 1996, page 188). Bernal Monreal and colleagues describe and designate the ramiform representations as 'arborescent' or 'fir' representations:

Subject to various interpretations, such representations of plant elements... zoomorphic motifs, repeated a vertical line crossed by multiple horizontal strokes. The position of the latter served to establish various subtypes (In Acosta Martínez, 1983, p. 23).

The history of art reveals different themes related to the presence of formal elements, which contribute to embellishments through mimesis, synthesis or abstraction, and incorporates a circumstantial reality of the human being. Such elements could be ornamental or decorative. Ferrer (2014, p. 37) mentions that: 'For Focillon, the ornament was the first alphabet of thought in the fight against space, an affirmation to which Maltese would add that it also meant a discourse, that is, the language of action, whereas Clédât suggests that it arose from religious ideas'; in addition, paraphrasing Fernández (2020, p. 2) we may say, that the plant motif ornament of reliefs or paintings was ascribed a symbolic and functional value, in a pleasant manner combining the spectator in an affective relationship with the architecture, the belongings, the bodies or the objects that the latter adorns. Therefore, religious enclosures could also functionally display pictorial thoughts. The ornaments here studied have undergone in their creation, a period of concealment and then a conditioned exposure. Here we can refer to the meaning of the ornamental concept of the grotesque.

In line with the above, Chastel (1978 and 2000) and Kayser (1981), (2014, p. 34), stated that the grotesque was: *'One kind of decoration that generated the most controversy among art historians dedicated mainly to the architecture developed between the last decades of the fifteenth century and the seventeenth century [...]'. The revised ornamental motif is actually part of a Hispanic cultural and artistic transfer in the spaces of viceregal religious architecture of the 16<sup>th</sup> century.*

The elements of grotesque, was described as follows González (1996, pp. 77-78):

The thick, smooth, and high walls, barely pierced by windows that shine enough light, never destroy the domain of the massive; they receive the vault that, if it is a barrel vault, joins the wall without marking transitions between the curve of the intrados and the straight line of the supporting panel. There are no dividing impostos or cornices - if anything, some stripes painted with grotesques slightly denote that union.

Thus, the Hispanic friars and master builders searched for design solutions in indigenous resources and talent, and in this way they fused the labour and sensitivity of new native and totally new architectural programs with what could be carried over as a plastic legacy of the colonial Baroque style.

## **Methodology**

To demonstrate this indigenization of architectural ornaments, a qualitative methodology is applied here to select ornamental units. These pattern motifs are explained, described, and analysed, in the following phases:

- I. Location of pictorial evidence; the first example, located in the ornamental set A-1 and A-2, was identified behind the *Tribuna-Celosía* [Tribune-Latticework] altar (Figure 2), on the east side of the nave of the temple, considering its visual access through a small and discreet central door, in the second body of the altarpiece (Figures 4 and 5). The remaining ornaments, B, C and D, were discovered during the restoration of the building, in a group of borders of a cell on the north bay, which was on the upper floor of the main cloister. Ornaments B, C, and D were manually traced on translucent paper, following the outline of the plant shapes. For the ornamental set A-1 and A-2, only the photographic record was available due to access limitations.
- II. Digitisation in graphics software of the transfer ornaments, as a tool for descriptive and formal study and for its recovery and preservation in digital media.
- III. Analysis of the principles of composition of the Shapes, in a visual field: pattern, rhythm and balance, movement, tension, proportion, weight and value, and colour, determined in the theoretical material *Fundamentos Geométricos Del Diseño y la Pintura Actual* [Geometric Fundamentals of Design and Contemporary Painting] by the Master of Visual Arts Edmundo García (2010), see Table I.
- IV. The last phase relates to some plant species suitable for the local climate or universal to an iconographic reference as a possible inspiration to represent the ornaments.

**Table 1**

*Principles of composition in Shapes* (García Esteves, 2010, pp. 22-45), referred to ornamental units

Pattern	The most elementary composition is supported by lines, sometimes one line is enough, as an ordering principle.
Rhythm and balance	Object and compositional mass are significant elements. The masses must simultaneously compensate for each other in their various positions and qualities.
Movement	This law is fulfilled if the elements arranged in the plane suggest dynamics and action.
Tension	Synonym of force behaviour. The shapes of the sign and space build relationships of influence, measurement, and control
Proportion	Principle underlying a simple condition: to avoid both equality of two measures and a great difference between them. Proportion is also the relationship between dimensions and between the parts and the whole.
Weight and value	The weight of a shape can be distributed in the space-format, acquiring different values that depended on the position occupied.
Colour	Colour is the physical phenomenon associated with light; each colour and its range have their own language and meaning, with psychological applications and suggestions for the receiver.

## Results

### Ornamental set in A-1 and A-2

Examples of pictorial ornaments were found in the wall-internal support of the *Tribuna-Celosía* [Tribune-Latticework] altarpiece in a satisfactory state of preservation and in the initial aesthetic program of the religious nave, before the New Spain baroque style was implemented (Figures 4 and 5).



**Figures 4 and 5. Details of the *Tribuna-Celosía* [Tribune-Latticework] altarpiece; note the discreet door that communicates visually with the internal wall; and inside, the phytomorphic motifs in vertical ornamental borders. Ornamental set in A-1 and A-2. Photographs by the author (2021).**



**Table 2***Ornamental set in A-1 (detail of Figure 5 with a 90° right turn)*

Formal analysis:

**Pattern:** Three pattern variants, 1, 2 and 3 (red boxes), were detected to be acanthus leaf shapes, following a linear arrangement in their general syntax.

**Rhythm and balance:** The formal patterns are based on acanthus leaves (volute plant). Pattern 1 presents them in alternating positions above and below (yellow ellipse). Pattern 2 keeps them static by maintaining the constant height of the three shapes. Pattern 3 contains two equal and continuous shapes, followed by a longer shape.

**Proportion:** The shapes present regular height measurements, some of which are repetitive, thereby proportionally exposing a low-contrast system.

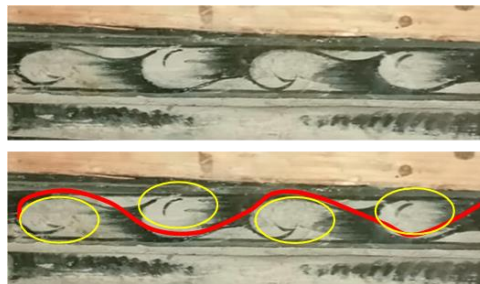
**Weight:** Most plant shapes maintain their visual weight at one end (green lines), and only two have opposite weights (yellow lines).

**Colour:** The shapes in a grey range suggest balance and resignation.

Suggested plant species:

*Acanthus, Acanthus mollis.*

'[...] herbaceous plant with large lobed leaves; a large spike with white flowers grows from its centre in spring. [...] It has been used since ancient times in gardening, and the image of its leaves were known widely to have been exhibited on the Corinthian capitals of classical Greece'. (Diez Garretas & Asensi Diez, 2021, p. 88).

**Table 3***Ornamental set in A-2 (detail of Figure 5 with a 90° right turn)*



Formal analysis:

Pattern: There are two patterns in the shape of a drop or seed, aligned and wavy, with a constant frequency (line in red).

Rhythm and balance: The detected patterns have a partial outline, with one extremity ending sharply, and alternating up and down (marked in yellow ellipses).

Proportion: The shapes have equal height and length dimensions, without compromising the system of proportionality between elements.

Colour: The shapes in a grey range suggest neutrality and tranquillity.

Suggested iconography:

The sustenance of the drops in the water element can have a symbolic load universally in all societies, as Haba and Rodrigo (1990, p. 272) indicate: *'The cult of the earth, animals, trees, water... has occurred since the most ancient times'*. In the pre-Columbian cosmovision of Mesoamerica, water takes on a relevant position as a generator of life, as Séjourné mentions (1957, p. 149):

Already with the goddess of the waters (Chalchiuhtlicue [...]), a close relative of Tlaloc, matter is endowed with the power of salvation, with its vapours rising to the sky to later descend, fertilised by the sun, and create life on earth.

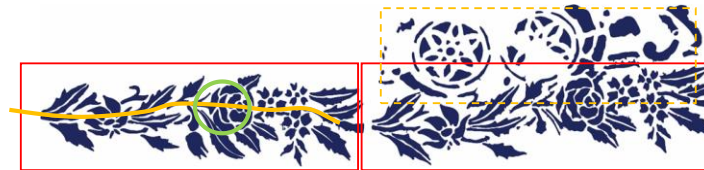
Recurrently, in the process of evangelisation of New Spain, ambivalent religious symbols were used, both by natives and by colonial religious authorities.

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**Ornament B**



**Figure 8. Ornament B, appearance of the walls before the intervention; note the ornamental borders with decorative motifs, found under several layers of thermoplastic paint. Photograph by the author (1999).**

**Table 4***Ornament B (vectorisation from Figure 8)*

Formal analysis:

Pattern: determined in the line with smooth undulations and irregular modulation (continuous line in yellow).

Rhythm and balance: The repetitive pattern (in the red box) has a circular mass that breaks and balances the horizontality of the set (circumscribed in green).

Tension: Leaves or branched extensions of the pattern are outlined to the right.

Colour: The white background suggests chastity, and the blue peace.

Suggested flower species:

Rose (in green circle), Sp species, ornamental shrub, with sarmentose stem and complete, cup-shaped, enveloping flower. It originates from temperate and subtropical zones of the northern hemisphere. López (2002) in the words of Yong (2004, pp. 53-54) (2004, pp. 53-54).

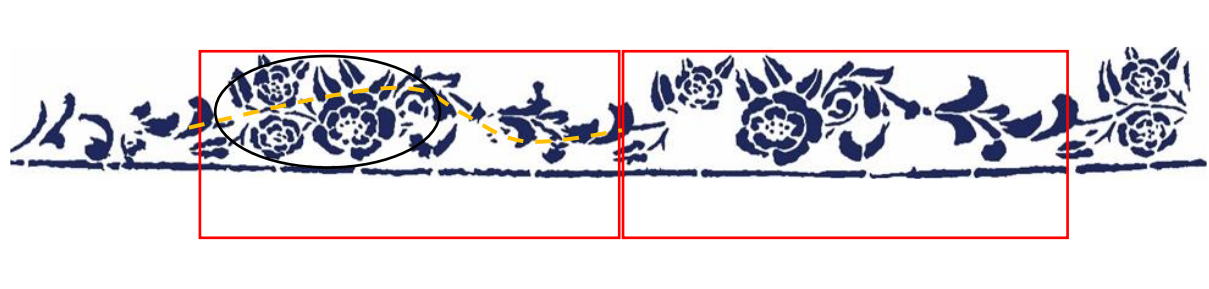
*Note:* The pattern in the yellow box is analysed in Table 6. Physically, the ornament visually invades ornament B.

**Ornament C**

**Figure 10. Ornament C. Photograph by the author (1999).**

**Table 5**

*Ornament C (vectorisation from Figure 10)*

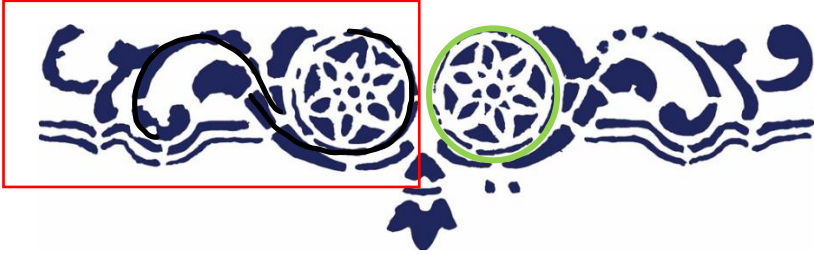

<p>Formal analysis:</p> <p>Pattern: The arranged pattern (in red box) is defined with an asymmetric guiding curve executed with a positive stroke, as emphasised by the lower horizontal line.</p> <p>Balance and weight: The pattern has an imbalance resulting from the mass of floral elements grouped on the left (black ellipse).</p> <p>Movement: A dynamic is detected in the undulation of the guiding curve, with a greater ascending line.</p> <p>Colour: The white background suggests purity, and the blue line suggests hope.</p> <p>Suggested iconography:</p> <p>The following religious meaning is taken from the floral species Rose and the rhetoric of its thought, according to Gauding (2009, p. 301): <i>'The red rose became over time the symbol of the blood of Christian martyrs and of the Virgin Mary.'</i></p>

**Ornament D**



**Figure 12. Ornament D. Photograph by the author (1999)**

**Table 6***Ornament D (vectorisation from Figure 12)*


<p style="text-align: center;">Formal analysis.</p> <p>Pattern: the elemental composition of the pattern (in red box) is based on the volute of its stroke, with inverted development (black lines).</p> <p>Rhythm and balance: perceived in handling the aforementioned asymmetric curve.</p> <p>Dynamic: interrupted when the same pattern is symmetrically opposed.</p> <p>Tension: the concentric floral ornament works as a sign of visual control (in green circle).</p> <p>Weight: The pattern contains a floral ornament with five petals, which generates a focal point.</p> <p>Colour: The white background proposes illumination, and the blue shapes introspection.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Suggested flower species</p> <p><i>Pega ropa</i> (in the green circle), <i>Mentzelia hispida</i>, solitary flower with a corolla of five broadly domed, pointed petals up to three centimetres long; suitable for temperate climate, this species is distributed in the local territory (Secretaría del Medio Ambiente y Ordenamiento Territorial Guanajuato, 2020, p. 202).</p>

**Conclusion**

The results elucidate that pictorial activities in colonial societies can be linked to two factors. The first factor is the enriching influence of the natural environment. This includes the appropriation of plant species and their ornamental characteristics, starting from the figurative and including the synthesised management of cultural concepts, for communication in architectural spaces. The second factor is the presence of an essential grotesque style with hand-drawn patterns, influenced by classical beauty in the arrangement of spirals or harmonic and symmetric scrolls, with chromatic simplicity, albeit with a strong formal and psychological character. Moreover, the aesthetic experience of the European grotesque ornament, inherited from the viceroyalty, was recreated in the analysis of units, and considered as elements of universal art. Ultimately, the objects examined in this study open up possibility of research on reactive sensory emotions, derived from the Mexican cultural imaginary, with adaptations in various universal artistic models.

### Declaration of Conflict of Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest.

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