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SUMMARY From Preaching Relic to Apologetic Metaimage: The Discursive and Visual Transformation in *Saint Luke Painting Our Lady of the Snows* by Juan Correa

*Alfredo Adolfo Ortega Ordaz**

Abstract

In the temple of La Profesa in Mexico City, there is a mid-16th century image-relic, believed to be a *de visu* copy from the Marian icon *Salus Populi Romani*. This painting was imported from Rome with the arrival of the Jesuits to New Spain, serving as a visual preacher during the evangelization process and establishment of the first colleges. At the end of the 17th century, artist Juan Correa modified its format, incorporating Saint Luke the painter into the composition and thereby creating a *metaimage*. This modification was driven by shifts in visual culture, Creole apologetic interests within the Society of Jesus, and the artist's effort to elevate painting as a liberal art. This article examines this discursive and functional transformation through the study of visual rhetoric and the object-circumstance relationship, analyzing how the image evolved in dialogue with its respective spectator society.

Keywords: visual rhetoric • viewer • visual culture • relic • meta-image

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Our Lady of the Snows A Transatlantic Devotion

The Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome houses the *Salus Populi Romani*, an icon that, according to legend, was painted by Saint Luke the Evangelist himself, granting it the status of a relic (Figure 1). Tradition traces its origins to the time when the Virgin Mary appeared in a dream to Pope Liberius and instructed him to build the basilica at the site of a miraculous sign. According to this account, on August 5, 352, in the middle of summer, snowfall covered the Esquiline Hill, precisely where the basilica was later constructed (Lopez Garcia 2020, 62-63). As a testimony to this miracle, the icon acquired the honorary title of *Our Lady of the Snows*.

In the mid-17th century, during the church's reform, Saint Francis Borgia, Superior General of the Society of Jesus, commissioned numerous copies of this image to be distributed worldwide (Florencia 1755, 90) as a means of promoting the devotion. Later, at the century's end, four copies of the *Virgin of the Snows* arrived in New Spain as part of a large shipment of relics destined for the first Jesuit colleges. Among them was the copy intended for the Colegio Máximo de San Pedro y San Pablo. During its journey and following its arrival, the image was credited with miracles, ultimately becoming the patron of the College (Florencia 1755, 97-98).

Image-Relic: *Movere* and Proofs of Faith

Relics serve as enduring remnants of the sacred, preserving and embodying the presence of saints while documenting their earthly existence. At the same time, they authenticate faith and lend historical credibility to religious devotion (Meléndez 2017, 24; Bueno 1978, 9), reinforcing the authority of the past (Taylor 2016, 361).

The prototype image in Rome, as a *Theotokos* painted directly by Saint Luke, is considered the oldest known effigy, and thus, derives its significance from its documentary value (Cuadrillo 2001, 116). Its rhetorical power is built upon a tangible and legitimate vestige to which miraculous properties are attributed. However, as a portrait, it also functions as an image of likeness, signifying a shared status (Riello 2021; Vincent-Cassy 2021; Diaz Cayeros 2023).

What, then, is the connection between this relic-image and its copies sent to the Americas? Belting (2021 [1990], 65-75) asserts that supernatural power can be transferred through contact. Similarly, Pereda (2019, 104-110) argues that reproducing a sacred image entails more than merely replicating its physical form; it also transmits its legend and a deeper resemblance that transcends the visual: a new "original."

Although the copy at the Colegio Máximo lacks the material contact necessary to be ontologically legitimized as a relic, for the faithful in New Spain, it functioned as an image-relic. Its status—more honorific than theological—was reinforced through the ritualization of its

materiality and its ceremonial transfer. Thus, *Our Lady of the Snows* fulfilled a dual role: on one hand, its visual presence mediated the human experience between the visible and the invisible (Morgan 2005, 48); on the other, its materiality served as tangible evidence of faith.

Visual Preaching and New Rhetorics

By establishing itself as the patron of the Colegio Máximo de San Pedro y San Pablo, this image-relic became a cultural model that aligned with the missionary and institutional objectives of the Society of Jesus. Its provenance, origin legend, and materiality lent authority to an evangelization system centered on the foundation of colleges and the strategic use of imagery to cultivate devotion. Within this framework, the historical, material, and spiritual circumstances surrounding its arrival in New Spain shaped its role as a visual preacher.

As one of the first images to arrive and be enshrined as a patron, *Our Lady of the Snows* played a crucial role in consolidating a visual communication system within a diverse and nascent population. In this regard, the Society of Jesus emphasized the exaltation of visuality in accordance with the order's institutional interests. Thus, they adapted gospel teachings to the sensibilities of local society and traditions, integrating them into their missionary approach (Ortiz Islas and Hausen Cole 2003, 30-33).

Saint Luke painting the Virgin of the Snows Of Intentions and Reconfigurations

Between 1680 and 1695, Juan Correa modified the image of the Virgin of the Snows (Obregón 1975, 342; Elisa Vargaslugo 2017, 274-275). The revised composition captures a moment in which Saint Luke adds the final details to the painting. His posture and gestures create a parallel with the Infant Jesus, using him as a formal reference and establishing a dialectical relationship with both the Virgin's face and the gaze of the spectator (Figure 2). Below the image, a cartouche narrating its history was added in 1822.

The modified version of the painting was already documented by Florencia (1755, 97). However, neither the *Zodiaco Mariano* nor the cartouche explicitly attribute the work to Juan Correa, raising questions about the intentions behind this addition. In response, Cuadriello (2001, 122) suggests that the inclusion serves a discursive function, reinforcing the *acheropoietic* nature of the *Virgin of Guadalupe* —the primary Marian devotion of the sanctuary where the painting was displayed. In this sense, the intervention plays a narrative role, visually alluding to its own origins while simultaneously exalting the *non manufacta* nature of the Guadalupana. Furthermore, the modifications must be understood in the context of the Jesuit commissioning body, which sought to revitalize devotion to this Marian image during a period marked by the renewal of sacred sites and the flourishing of apparitionist literature—the *Zodiaco Mariano* (1755) being a prime example of this genre (Rubial García 2008).

These chronicles, symptomatic of the evolving religious sensibilities and consciousness of the mid-17th century, function as apologies for Creole society and exalt the work of regular religious orders amid the increasing influence of secular clergy (Escandón Bolaños 1992, 5). While the explicit motivations behind the material and discursive renovation of the *Virgin of the Snows*—and her contemporary inclusion in the *Zodiaco Mariano*—are not stated, they appear to align with the broader Creole apologetic trends of the time, likely serving as the driving force behind the modifications.

Visual *Exordium*: New Perspectives, Different Narratives

The intervention in the *Theotokos* also reflects a shift in the perception and visual culture of its devotees. The modification embodies the intentions of a Society of Jesus that had already systematized its preaching mechanisms and was experiencing an institutional peak, fully integrated into a society with a flourishing cultural scene (Fernández 1994, 21-36). As a result, the discursive syntax of the image required greater complexity and adaptation to the visual culture of an increasingly erudite audience.

By this time, Our Lady of the Snows was no longer primarily intended to inspire the missionary zeal of novices, as the territory was no longer an uncharted or foreign land but an established city. Nevertheless, its original function as a visual preacher remained significant and needed to be recalled. Thus, the Jesuits sought a solution that would adapt the image's discourse for new viewers while simultaneously enhancing its status as an image-relic. This was achieved through figurative mediation, which made the image's historicity both visible and tangible (González García 2015, 353-357).

Juan Correa, a liberal painter

The reform of the ordinances governing the painters' and gilders' guild—demanded by New Spanish artists—was a direct consequence of an epistemological shift within the artistic community, which redefined the painter as a creator of intellectual values.

The debate regarding painting as a liberal art emerged not only among painters themselves but also among poets and jurists (Mues Orts 2011, 85). A key argument in defense of the liberality of painting, both in the Iberian Peninsula and in New Spain, was the *Ut pictura poesis* analogy, which exalted the mimetic potential of both poetry and painting as a “mirror of reality” (Ghignoli 2020, 150). Likewise, the metaphorical model of the *Deus Pictor*—which positioned the painter as an imitator of a divine creative act—was widely promoted (Cuadriello 2001, 141-142).

These intellectual reflections did not go unnoticed in New Spain; they permeated artistic society and found expression in the revised ordinances. Consequently, Juan Correa's intervention

reflects these ideas: the traces of his work reveal an acute awareness of, and an apologetic stance toward, the liberality of painting. By encoding these cultured arguments within the figure of the evangelist, Correa deliberately affirmed the intellectual status of his art.

Visual Mechanisms: Parallelism, Deixis and *Metaimage*

Juan Correa's addition to the painting was not a direct modification of the relic-image but rather a framing device that re-signified it, establishing a dialectical relationship between materiality, depicted gestures, and the spectators' gaze. His intervention can be considered an adjunct figure, integrating new elements into the linguistic-visual proposition (Cao 1998, 50). More precisely, it functions as a *visual parallelism: a figure of compositio* in which rhythm and structural correspondence create meaning (Carrere and Saborit 2000, 256). In this sense, Correa's addition extends the visual rhythm of the composition, establishing a formal and conceptual projection between the Infant Jesus and the evangelist-painter.

Similarly, the addition also serves as a deictic resource, as it visually and linguistically establishes a place, a time, and a character. Previously, before the intervention, the image functioned as a portrait set against a golden background, abstractly evoking a celestial space. However, Correa's modification now situates the scene in a specific moment: Saint Luke, inside his workshop, applying the final brushstrokes. Once again, this analogy extends beyond the image, reflecting a broader context in which painters strive to establish themselves as a discipline that mirrors Creation.

Additionally, another visual mechanism with specific functions capitalizes on the powers associated with the relic-image: the meta-image. According to Mitchell (2009 [1994], 50), this device serves to stage the self-awareness of images, reflecting the artist's perception of their own creative process. However, its activation is not confined solely to an internal projection. As a reflection of both the circumstances of its creation and the viewer's visual culture, it establishes a tripartite relationship between artist, image, and audience (Portús Pérez 2016, 15-16).

The legitimacy that defines the relic-image is thus integrated into the mechanisms that activate the *metaimage*, granting it authenticity through the remnants of sacredness associated with the absent bodies of Mary and the Christ Child —traces that persist, embedded in the pictorial materiality. This quality reinforces what is known as the *gaze of belief*, a way of circumventing the void left by the absence of these bodies, which are paradoxically perceived as tangible (Didi-Huberman 2010 [1992]). This process relies on the creation of a fictitious model that replaces visible perception with an imaginary one (Espinosa Cerviño 2021, 1-15). Thus, the *true image* does not reside in the material object itself but is instead encrypted in spiritual understanding (Mitchell 2016 [1986], 57).

Epilogue: Departure and Return

Although Correa's modification could have meant the end of the image's journey, it underwent another modification in 1822: the addition of a descriptive cartouche. This inscription, serving as a form of notarial authentication, summarized the image's history, incorporating the Florenzia text while also mentioning its loss and recovery after the Jesuit expulsion.

According to the added text, in 1769 —two years after the Jesuits were expelled— the painting, along with the Guadalupan altar, was transferred to the Franciscan church of San Bartolome in Naucalpan as part of the redistribution of Jesuit property. Meanwhile, the church of La Profesa was occupied by the Congregation of San Felipe Neri, which still resides there. By the early 19th century, recognizing the image's significance, the order sought to reclaim it, offering to exchange any work from their oratory. Consequently, in 1812, the painting was returned to La Profesa. In that sense, the Philippine order had a clear notion of its provenance and the functions it performed during the Jesuit administration. Hence, the decision to add the cartouche to serve as a document.

Today, the image is displayed on the left lateral altar of the temple, accompanied by a polychrome sculpture of the same invocation. Two angel-supported medallions flank it, bearing Latin inscriptions that reference its protective power and longstanding tradition. Though the neoclassical altarpiece does not explicitly highlight the image's past role as a preacher and patroness of the most significant Jesuit college in New Spain, the medallions, cartouche, and depiction of Saint Luke as intercessor serve as lasting reminders of its legacy and its connection to its sister image on the Esquiline Hill (Figure 3).

Conclusions

This study has examined how the image of the *Virgin of the Snows* was transformed and adapted to its audience, as well as to its extensive geographical, devotional, and functional trajectory. The modifications it underwent responded to the political, social, and visual context of New Spain. Juan Correa, fully aware of the established conventions surrounding the image, was able to discern the evolving perceptual expectations of New Spanish society. Thus, he crafted a new visual discourse that simultaneously affirmed the antiquity and legitimacy of its prototype while addressing contemporary concerns.

In this way, the sacred remnants embedded within this transatlantic image-relic not only embodied the absent *Theotokos* for its devotees but also served as an apologetic argument for various political and ideological positions. Whether to legitimize Creole identity, recall the Society of Jesus's glorious past, or exalt the intellectual status of New Spanish painters, *Saint Luke Painting the Virgin of the Snows* ultimately functioned as a representation of ideals. It became an intercession between the celestial and the earthly, an action expressed in the gerund and remaining "non-finite": a miracle initiated in Rome and perpetuated in New Spain.



Fig. 1: *Salus Populi Romani*, ca. 5th–13th century, unidentified artist, Basilica of Saint Mary Major, Rome, Italy. Public domain photograph, licensed under Creative Commons. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Salus_Populi_Romani_after_restoration.jpg



Fig. 2: Juan Correa, *Saint Luke Painting the Virgin of the Snows*, late 17th century, Altar dedicated to the Virgin of the Snows, Templo de la Profesa, Mexico City. Photograph by Eumelia Hernández Vázquez and Víctor Gerardo Vázquez Miranda, 2001, Archivo Fotográfico “Manuel Toussaint”, Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas, UNAM.



Figure 3. Altar of the Virgin of the Snows, unidentified artist, 19th century, Templo de la Profesa, Mexico City. Photograph by Alfredo Ortega, 2023.

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