

## **Artistic Geography and the Northern Jesuit Missions of New Spain**

By Clara Bargellini

Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México

[cioni@servidor.unam.mx](mailto:cioni@servidor.unam.mx)

(working paper, not be reproduced without the author's permission)

George Kubler's seminal thoughts on artistic geography came out of his involvement with the art and architecture of the Hispanic New World. This paper examines a group of 17th and 18th century Jesuit missions in northern Mexico in order to expand our understanding of New World artistic geography, and also to explore the history of some geographic notions and their place in art historical discussions. Whereas Kubler was concerned with the transmission of styles, my interest here will be the movement of specific objects and individuals within a particular historical configuration. This will involve, of course, considerations about patronage and institutions, with some references to iconography, all of which ultimately has implications for the transmission of styles, as Kubler would no doubt have recognized.

The missions in question were established in the first half of the 17th century by the Jesuits in the northern Tepehuan and Southeastern Tarahumara region, and were held by the Society until its 1767 expulsion from New Spain. From their arrival in 1572 the Jesuits focused on ministry among the native population of New Spain. Almost at once they began missionary activity among the indigenous populations in places near Mexico City. By 1580 they were established at Tepotzotlán learning native languages. In 1589 the Jesuits were among the legendary chichimecas at San Luis de la Paz, and two years later they were in Sinaloa, where they established an extraordinary system of missions about which we now have only documents and very sparse remains. In 1596 the Jesuits were in Durango and in contact with the Tepehuanes. They first came into direct contact with the Tarahumaras in 1607. Colonization was interrupted by the 1616 rebellion of the Tepehuanes, but conditions were stable enough by 1630 that a permanent mission could be established at San Miguel de Bocas, and in 1639 at San Felipe de Conchos and San Jerónimo de Huejotitán. Other missions followed. I shall refer to Nuestra Señora de Montserrat Nonoava, San Borja, Santa María de las Cuevas, Jesús Carichi, Santo Tomás Tojórare. I shall also make brief allusions to the Sonora and California missions.

We now have located these missions geographically and in a rough chronology, but what are the issues that make talking about artistic geography a fruitful enterprise in this case? Let us turn once again to Kubler. His Latin American experience was deepest in Mexico. There, after the Revolution of 1910, Mexican writers on art and architecture posited that color, and that a florid style called churrigueresque in defiance of history albeit with a feel for language, or ultrabaroque to emphasize its surpassing anything European, were defining elements of a national artistic essence. The most characteristic examples of this style were to be found south of the capital, in the area of Puebla-Tlaxcala and in the facades and interiors of churches elsewhere. Furthermore, all of Mexico was invariably seen and judged from the center, Mexico City. Kubler's thinking about artistic geography has many ramifications, but the nationalistic and centralized Mexican context of his writings must have prodded him to insist on multiple European connections for the New World and to advocate comparative studies. Seen in the perspective of his own national contemporary history, Kubler's call to transcend the inward looking Mexican nationalism around the middle of the 20th century, is directly related to his role as a scholar from the United States in Latin America in the immediate post World War II period.

Although ideas about New Spanish art in Mexico have seen many changes since the 1920's, it is only recently that nationalistic discourse has been largely relegated to the past, but centralism is still a problem, at the very least a practical one. Real distance from the center has certainly contributed to keeping the Jesuit Tarahumara churches out of art and architectural history. And when this distance takes on further implications, as it repeatedly has, geography becomes an issue worth exploring. These churches first appear in modern literature in the context of histories of the missions, and the notion of mission intersects with the idea of the frontier, which is a historical geographic construct. Furthermore, much of the early literature was written in the United States since parts of northern Mexico became southwest United States in the 19th century, so that the notion of frontier in which they were enmeshed has multiple layers. The northern frontier of New Spain, complex enough from a Mexican point of view, acquired additional drama as well as some of the heroics derived from the westward thrust of Manifest Destiny when it was described from the northern side of the border. In summary, the centralism of Mexico associated the missions with the barbarian north where, as the minister of education Vasconcelos once said, "civilization ends and barbecues begin". Art and architecture, generally considered signs of "civilization", do not appear in this literature. The fascination of the frontier for North Americans made the missions the sites for heroic work by extraordinary men. In this they were seconded and complemented by church historians, most of them Jesuits both in Mexico and in the United States. Art and architecture do appear here, as proof of missionary tenacity in difficult circumstances.

The concept and the associations of the heroic frontier which emerge from classic texts such as Henry Bolton's account of the legendary missionary, the Jesuit Francisco Kino, on the Rim of Christendom, or those of the Jesuit historians Peter Masten Dunne and Gerard Decorme and others, whose eulogizing works were the first to focus specifically on the Tarahumara missions, have been questioned in recent historical works. However, since the art and architecture have never been examined seriously, they often are still used today in much the same way they were used in the past. A very recent example, in

an important study, is the mission at Cocospera in Sonora, founded by Kino, in an early 20th century photo, reproduced opposite the title page of a 1999 book about the art of Jesuit missions. The caption declares that it “epitomizes the frontier aspect of the outer-circle missions”. What we see is a grand church, alone in a bleak landscape, no other buildings, no people, very little vegetation.

I question the capacity of these notions of isolation and distance from the center, which constitute the idea of the frontier, to explain these buildings satisfactorily. A closer look at the churches and at the objects as they existed in the 17th and 18th centuries results in a different picture, much more in line with the results of recent historical studies, and it points to ways in which art history can make significant contributions to our understanding of these places.

Even superficial knowledge of the Jesuits, their corporate culture, and their history in New Spain, would lead us to expect that their missions would be well provided for. The missions were a primary activity for the Society. Francis Xavier, friend and companion of Ignatius, is often cited as the greatest missionary of all time, and Ignatius himself urged the sending of Jesuits to the New World, years before it happened. The decrees and opinions of the early years of the Society in New Spain document once and again the central place of the missions. The same is true of Jesuit art in New Spain. For example, when the main retablo of the Profesa church in Mexico City was set up in 1622, it honored St. Ignatius among the twelve apostles. Since the Profesa was built after difficult discussions in Mexico City and between Rome and New Spain about how best to distribute resources between the missions and the colleges and churches in the cities, the apostolic emphasis of the retablo is to be read as an acknowledgement of the importance of the missions. The fact that the novitiate was established at Tepotzotlán, close to Mexico City, but an indigenous community, was yet another sign of the centrality of the missions for the self image of the Jesuits and for their representation of themselves to colonial society.

The support system for the missions in New Spain began with the Crown which provided a stipend for each one, and in the Society through a Procurador in Mexico City who was responsible for fulfilling the petitions (*memorias*) regularly sent from the missions, which often included requests for images and liturgical objects. The Society had productive activities, chiefly at their haciendas, which supported the missions and the colleges. Furthermore, the Mexican Province had communication not only with Spain and within New Spain, but with the headquarters of the order in Rome and with other Jesuit Provinces. The Society and, consequently, the missions received donations from many places, through patrons, both ecclesiastical and civil. This could happen in Mexico City, of course, but it also could happen closer to the missions or at the missions themselves. Finally, the missions had the revenue which their own local agricultural or craft production might provide. The objects found at the missions originated in the economic circuits just suggested, which can be identified geographically: Europe and elsewhere outside of New Spain-Mexico City-the missions, New Spain-Mexico City-the missions, New Spain-the missions, the missions among themselves and with nearby places. Although it is usually impossible to know exactly how any one object may have reached

a mission, it is obvious that the support system created a web of artistic relations between the missions and many other places in the world and in the viceroyalty.

We know of various European works in the Tarahumara missions. The Jesuit Province imported paintings, reliquaries and other objects from Italy through its contacts in Rome. A copy of the Virgin and Child allegedly painted by St. Luke, venerated in Santa Maria Maggiore, is said to have gone to the mission at Chínipas deep in the Sierra Madre. That painting is lost, but other versions were made, including one now at Santo Tomás in the Tarahumara. We should remember, too, the Italian painting of the Holy Mother of Light brought from Italy in 1732 with the intention of taking it to the missions. The missionaries might also receive objects directly from Europe, as when the Italian missionary Benito Rinaldini received relics and books from Rome at his mission at Nabogame in the Tarahumara. Probably European were a set of 16 landscapes, specifically identified as oil paintings, measuring about 40 cm in width, which surrounded a large painting of St. Jerome in the mission at Huejotitán, north of Parral, in 1666. Now lost, these would have reached Huejotitán sometime after its 1639 foundation. Landscapes were relatively rare in New Spain; they existed almost exclusively in the collections of wealthy colonists, so these may have originated in a donation. In the sacristy at Huejotitán there was also a painting on bronze of Jesus with Mary and Martha, also likely a European work.

The most important European objects still conserved at the missions are sculptures from Spain. Since these were not too rare in New Spain, they would probably have been acquired in Mexico City by the Procurador and sent to the missions. It is the case of a Christ Child and a St. Francis Borgia, of the seventeenth century, both at San Borja, a mission founded in 1639 and refounded after the Tarahumara rebellion of 1652. These two were important enough as cult objects that they can be traced in the inventories. The most numerous European objects in the missions were prints and books. Prints are mentioned in practically all of the mission inventories, even of the most remote places; these were sometimes in the church, but most often in the houses of the missionaries, along with books. Rarely are the prints identified, but we do have lists of the books in the College of Chihuahua, which is important for the Tarahumara missions. Printed works would have been sent from Mexico City, but were also carried by individual European missionaries. Antwerp and, again, Italy would have been the sources of many of these.

As almost everywhere in New Spain, there were also objects from Asia in the missions. There were Chinese vases in sacristies and churches, and Chinese dishes in the houses of the missionaries. There were a few ivory figures as well, notably one large Crucifix at Carichi and a Christ Child in a silver crib at Zape. Again, this is a category of luxury items, probably donated by wealthy colonists.

Among the objects made in and regularly sent from Mexico City, there were many sculptures. Since, as I just mentioned, these are often revered cult objects, a surprising number of seventeenth century images still exist. Although they are usually repainted, in combination with a reading of the inventories, they provide important evidence of the religious life of the missions, as can be traced in the case of Huejotitán. Some sculptures

that are in the 1666 inventory still exist in the church there. A large figure of Christ was then in a Santo Entierro; that is, it was displayed as a dead Christ, wrapped in a sheet. The Immaculate Conception was at the main altar, with the painting of St. Jerome and the landscapes just mentioned. The risen Christ had its own altar. This is a very frequent subject at the mission churches, which is a point to be further explored, since this is not the case in parishes. Iconography, too, has its geography, of course. St. Joseph with the Christ Child also had his own altar.

The missionary who made the 1666 inventory, declares that all the images, and everything in his list-- which is considerable--, was provided to the mission by the Society. The Tepehuanes and Tarahumaras only helped to pay for a lamp for the church. Obviously, the ones who were most interested in the decoration of the church were the Jesuits themselves.

Later, more sculptures arrived at Huejotitán. The archangel Michael must have come from Mexico City around 1690, since he resembles the work begun in 1684 by the sculptor Manuel de Velasco in the sacristy of Mexico City cathedral.

Paintings from Mexico City were also numerous from the very beginning. They were easy to transport, relatively cheap, and there were painters in the capital who produced extensively for distribution throughout the viceroyalty. The Jesuits at the missions knew about the painters in Mexico City, and often asked for the best. There was a painting by Villalpando, now lost, at Huejotitán. There are requests for paintings by Correa and Cabrera. At least one Cabrera is still today in the Sierra Madre. There are a number of paintings by Nicolás and Juan Rodríguez Juárez, and José de Páez. I suspect that the majority of the colonial paintings now in the state of Chihuahua came from Jesuit missions. It is certainly the case of the important collection at Santo Tomás, for example.

Other objects at the missions came from elsewhere in New Spain. The most frequently mentioned are: alabaster (tecali) and glass from Puebla, furniture, frames, lacquered gourds, and copper household and liturgical objects from Michoacán. Mexico City would have been the clearinghouse for some of these, especially the objects from Puebla, as well as for some silver liturgical objects.

However, the lists with requests sent to Mexico City do not account for all of the objects in the inventories. These were being acquired or accepted as donations in places closer to the missions. In the case of sculptures, we know that these were made much closer to the missions, in Durango or Parral. Although we have little information about this production, it certainly included the making of gilded altarpieces or retablos, at least from the middle of the 17th century. The missionary at San Miguel de Bocas, for example, asked for a "very beautiful, tender and compassionate" sculpture of the Virgin of Sorrows from Mexico City, "by a good master", but he adds that it should not come with a gilded base, because "those things are to be found here". "Here" would likely have been in a nearby center of production, Parral probably. Also at Huejotitán the sculpture of St. Francis Xavier, less complex in its composition than the sculptures we saw before, may well have been made in Parral or Durango. The same would be true of many of the silver pieces, since there were silversmiths in various places in north central New Spain.

Another category of objects produced not too far from the Tarahumara missions are painted hides and cloth from New Mexico.

The conclusion to be drawn is that these missions, very distant from Mexico City, were not so isolated if we look at the religious and liturgical objects they possessed. Indeed, we know that they were usually better decorated and provided for than most of the parish churches of Spanish towns throughout Nueva Vizcaya. This is easily proven by comparing the inventories of the missions with those of the parishes, and we have the explicit testimony of at least two of the bishops of Nueva Vizcaya on this point. (Tapiz and Tamarón). Although on the frontier, if we take the view from Mexico City or Europe, they can be thought of in the opposite way. They were, in many regards, actually at the center of a system that existed in large part to keep them functioning and provided for. The requests on the lists which have come down to us can be interpreted as indications of how a missionary might think of his mission as the center of the world, deserving of receiving objects from everywhere. To adopt and invert the vocabulary cited earlier, in this view the outermost circle for the missions was comprised of not only the European cities whence many of the missionaries came, but as far as art is concerned, by Rome, Antwerp, various cities in Spain, and also Asia. Closer than Europe, although on an outer circle with respect to the missions, was Mexico City. There followed the closer circle of Durango, New Mexico and other northern places.

A painting that in 1666 was at San Ignacio, a subsidiary Huejotitán, is eloquent on the issue of the centrality of the missions for the Jesuits. In a recently built adobe church, the painting, over a meter high, was described as “by an able hand, of our Apostle of the Indies, St. Francis Xavier, dressed in the habit of the Society and on his knees, in the middle (of the composition), receiving from Our Lord Christ some crowns and passing them to angels who, in turn, give them to our martyrs in Japan and to St. Philip of Jesus”. This extraordinary composition, of which I do not know any surviving version anywhere, testifies to the centrality of the missions and of missionary heroism for the Jesuits, and to their own importance and preeminence for New Spain and as universal missionaries. St. Philip of Jesus was a Franciscan from Mexico City, martyred in Japan, and he had been beatified and declared patron of New Spain in 1629. In the painting the Jesuit missionary Francis Xavier is the conduit for Philip’s glorification as well as that of his fellow Jesuits, also killed in Japan. It is a universalist Jesuit message for a New Spanish audience, an audience that included the Jesuits themselves. What the Tarahumaras might have thought is difficult to know, yet the very existence of this high quality and iconographically original painting at San Ignacio is yet one more proof that the missions were provided with the best and were not isolated from the rest of New Spanish society.

This examination of importations to the missions has brought us closer and closer to the actual mission buildings and to the decoration directly applied to them. The buildings, their carved stone portals, the painted ceilings and walls, most of the woodwork in the churches and sacristies, all had to have been produced at the missions themselves. The evidence of local artistic production is irrefutable. We are no longer dealing with importations from far and near through a complex support system, nor directly with wealthy patrons. However, the precise character of this local production, when

considered in terms of artistic geography is problematic, and it further questions the frontier mission thesis, because it points to the need for a different definition and description of the Tarahumara mission endeavor itself.

The reason the local mission production of art and architecture is a problem is that, when we look at what was done, and as art historians ask who did it and how, some of the answers result in a picture of these missions as much more complicated entities than that imagined by the notion of a frontier institution. There had to have been more agents at the missions, beyond a Jesuit or two and their Tarahumara or Tepehuan neophytes plus a few other natives and some nearby soldiers.

To begin with, we know enough about the material culture of the precontact Tarahumaras and Tepehuanes to be quite certain that they did not have large buildings, nor did they make sculpture or wall paintings. The missionaries often commented on their interest in music and their love of ceremony. This may be true or self serving or both, but it does not explain the art and architecture we see today at a place like Santa María de las Cuevas, for example. Of course, since the most impressive of these missions date from the late 17th and early 18th century, it is possible that by then some Tepehuanes and Tarahumaras had learned painting and carving, yet this begs the question, since someone had to have taught them.

The painted ceiling at Santa Maria de las Cuevas is one of the most notable to have survived in Mexico from the colonial period. Symbols of the Litany of the Virgin within lozanges and rectangles are surrounded by stylized leaves and flowers in many colors. Other painted ceilings exist in the Tarahumara, notably at Santa Cruz, and documents tell us of still others. An overview of New Spanish architecture demonstrates that the greatest concentration of this sort of decoration was produced in Michoacán, and it is there that its most complex surviving examples are still to be seen. A reasonable conclusion is that there were Tarasco indians from Michoacán at the Tarahumara missions. It is also an entirely plausible conclusion, because we know that there were many Tarascos in the Tepehuan area farther south. They are also mentioned as being present in the Tarahumara, and these ceilings indicate that they may have been major agents in the artistic production of the missions.

A hypothesis of this tenor goes against the notion of isolated missions, but it is in accord with the image of the Tarahumara missions that has been appearing ever more clearly and decisively in recent historical studies which take into account research in demography and economics. One of the important elements of this more nuanced picture of the missions for our purposes is precisely the multiplicity of native groups that were present and their mobility. Up to now we have been analyzing the artistic geography of the Tarahumara missions as if the missionaries and the objects moved while the natives did not. We have also proceeded as if the Tepehuanes and Tarahumaras were the only natives on the missions. In fact, neither of these circumstances applied, and the presence of other northern indigenous groups as well as of Christian natives from farther south who accompanied the missionaries must become a part of the art history of the missions as well. The case of the painted ceilings is not the only one in which the mobility of native groups or individuals forms part of the artistic geography of the missions. Another

combines the mobility of natives with the mobility of an object. An image of the Virgin of the Candelaria in 1666 is said to belong to the Tarahumaras of the mission of San Ignacio. This peculiar statement must mean that the particular Tarahumaras were not recent converts, and that they probably came from somewhere else, since the missionary acknowledges that he does not have authority over their image.

As both the missions and the documents are more carefully surveyed, art history can make important contributions to our knowledge of life on the missions. For example, the carved and painted niche at Huejotitán was probably made in conjunction with the growth of the cult of the Virgin of Sorrows. The Jesuits actively promoted the Dolorosa from the end of the 17th century onwards, and all the missions, without exception, had an image of her. The Huejotitán image was requested in 1727, and it must have been around then that the Christ who had been exhibited normally in a Santo Entierro, as we saw earlier, was moved to a cross in the niche. Unquestionably a local work, the carved and painted niche retablo is to be related to descriptions of what must have been similar work in other missions. Inventories and closer studies of objects will eventually throw light on this indigenous production, through clues about types of craftsmen and their movements.

Craft and artistic activity is confirmed by the quantities and varieties of tools in mission inventories: carpentry, stone and iron working are amply represented, everywhere with a similar range of tools. These are widespread and recurrent, since the missionaries must have needed certain basic tools for many tasks. When the tools exceed the norm, however, it is probably because there was a certain kind of production at the mission. For example, Cerocahui and Norogachi had exceptionally well appointed carpentry, stone cutting, and blacksmith shops in the middle of the 18th century. Further studies of inventories, of the same places at different times, should make clear whether the presence of many tools in any one place was an extraordinary occurrence indicating a major construction or decorating campaign by an itinerant worker or group of workers, or whether it means that there was a particular and steady production at any one place. In any case, the stylistic differences among surviving examples of ceiling painting and wooden retablos, at least, point to more than one group or individual.

Nor should we assume that all craftsmen were indigenous. Another recent major shift in the historiography of the missions has chipped away further at the classical frontier idea. In the past the missions and the presidios, or the cross and the sword as it is often put, were seen as the basic pioneering frontier institutions. We now know that the Tarahumara missions were, in fact, always established where Spanish colonists had already made inroads, and that most soldiers were actually colonists. In other words, the missions were from their very foundation compromised and in constant relationships with Spaniards who lived nearby.

It is with respect to architecture that we see major implications for the Jesuit missions and their place in the society of Nueva Vizcaya. In many of the missions there were compasses and plumb lines, and we know that some missionaries engaged in simple building activity, but we have no documentation about Tarahumara mission Jesuits with specialized architectural knowledge. There certainly was knowledge of adobe and straw

construction, which many native groups had and was practiced everywhere. However, stone and vault construction was out of reach in Nueva Vizcaya, except for the cathedral of Durango, when a cleric-architect, Pedro Gutiérrez Patarren, arrived there in 1640. He did not stay long, and there is no evidence that he had anything to do with any mission buildings.

By around 1680, however, the Jesuits obviously wanted to construct more durable and impressive structures. This marks an important step, because on the whole, it seems that missionaries saw a significant difference between erecting imposing buildings and decorating the interior of a church. The latter was deemed proper, while the former was thought superfluous or at least problematic. Bernardo Rolandegui, Italian missionary at Carichi, later to become Provincial, in a 1682 report, asked that Simón de Castro be sent north. Simón de Castro, actually Simón Boruhradsk\_, was a czech Jesuit lay brother, “carpenter, craftsman, musician, painter and knowledgeable in mechanics...and medicine”, who, among other things, would propose a plan to reconstruct the Viceregal Palace in Mexico City after its partial destruction in the 1692 riots. Although Castro was not sent, the Sicilian Jesuit Francisco María Piccolo, who was the missionary at Carichi a few years later, took advantage of the presence in Parral of another architect, Simón de los Santos, and got him to go to the mission. De los Santos, who was a mulatto probably of Portuguese origin, had arrived in Parral between 1672 and 1678 from Mexico City at the request of a group of miners and merchants to build them a new parish church, which is the oldest surviving vaulted structure in all of Nueva Vizcaya. The Parral parish was finished in 1686, and Simón de los Santos spent much of the 1690’s at Carichi, until he was called to Durango in 1698 to replace the master architect of the cathedral who had had to return to Guadalajara whence he had come.

It is possible that someone of the Parral elite had a hand in financing the Carichi project. Whatever the case, Piccolo reported that he and the Indians had built the church with the supervision and instruction of the maestro. In this case, the natives were Tarahumaras who had come from various places and settled there when the mission was founded. The church at Carichi is a basilica, unique in the Tarahumara and among the buildings with which De los Santos was involved. The image of Early Christian basilicas he had seen in Rome must have been in Piccolo’s mind when he discussed the building with De los Santos, in the bustling mining town of Parral and at the mission in the foothills of the Sierra Madre. In 1725 Father Güenduláin wrote that the Carichi mission reminded him of the old church of the Profesa in Mexico City, also a basilica. The entire episode is most significant for artistic geography. And so is the fact that the Carichi mission, through its building project, produced a labor force that was probably occupied later elsewhere, in other missions and eventually in Spanish towns as well.

Remarkable as the Carichi church is, it is not vaulted. We know that vaulting was the major architectural problem that required expert handling in Nueva Vizcaya. Only at mission Santa Cruz was a dome built sometime before 1707, and a “sort of barrel vault of wood made in such a way that, whitewashed and painted, it is not easy to tell from below if it is wood or a masonry vault”. The dome, of pumice stone, was probably the first one to be erected in Nueva Vizcaya north of Durango. It is not certain who the architect was

at Santa Cruz. His name may show up in documents concerning the Jesuit Antonio Herrera, from Valencia, who was the missionary behind the project. However, it is just as probable that it show up in documents in Chihuahua, recently founded and a booming mining town, just turned villa in 1718. Indeed, padre Herrera was the rector at the newly established College there between 1718 and 1720, exactly the years of its construction (begun in 1718 and finished by June 19, 1719). Since the architect at the College was José de la Cruz, employed earlier at the cathedral of Durango, and Herrera in 1707 mentions the Chihuahua College church as one which will be built after his church at Santa Cruz, it is quite possible that De la Cruz was the architect at the mission, and that the Jesuits were responsible for his presence in the region. José de la Cruz later became the chief architect of the new parish church of Chihuahua, the northernmost vaulted church built in the first half of the 18th century.

In summary, at the local level, Jesuit concern with their missions and their adornment eventually provided not only for the missions but had an impact on art and architecture in Spanish towns as well. Indeed, the mission churches by around 1700 were at the centers of towns with mixed populations, and were functioning in many ways as parishes, and they were dealing with the need to build for the stability that came with urbanization. There were natives of various origins who participated in decorating the churches. At the same time, non indigenous architects and probably other artists were recruited elsewhere, and the mission churches became training places for craftsmen.

Jesuit response to the ambiguous situation of the Tarahumara missions, especially in the 18th century when the native population had greatly decreased and the missions were anything but isolated, is, paradoxically, at the root of the insistence on the frontier in modern historiography. The Jesuit historians who first wrote about the missions in the 20th century based themselves on the writings and documents left by their predecessors in the Society who had served in the Tarahumara. I do not mean to deny the missionaries their merits, however, it is important to realize that the central place of the missions in the Jesuits' conception of themselves both as a group and as individuals, made the missions essential. Thus the missionaries emphasized their difficulties and isolation, their position at "la frontera de la gentilidad", as they often put it. This had been true in many ways, especially in the early years, but the Jesuits continued to insist upon it because they wanted to keep the missions, and to do that the missions had to be considered indispensable by the rest of colonial society. Once there were no more gentile Indians to convert and instruct, the missions lost their explicit reason for existing and would be secularized, that is, pass on to be administered as normal parish churches by the diocesan clergy. Indeed, from the 1660's onwards there was discussion both within and without the Society about secularizing the older missions. Eventually, in 1753, the Jesuits themselves agreed to the secularization of several of the missions just discussed.

At Santa María de las Cuevas, above the entrance to the baptistry, a wall painting shows two angels holding the Jesuit emblem. Below an inscription informs whoever approaches that St. Francis Xavier, the model for all Jesuit missionaries, had baptized 1,200,000 souls. Being a wall painting, it was certainly executed by an artist working at the mission. But, for whom was this image painted? One wonders what an indigenous audience might

have thought of it. Rather, it would seem to have been directed towards an audience of the colonizers, and a literate one at that. It reinforces the emphasis on baptism which is repeated in many Jesuit documents of the time in which the numbers of the baptised are presented once and again in the context of arguments about the necessity and usefulness of the missions for colonization. The inscription would seem to indicate that already in the early 18th century, when the wall was painted, the congregation of the mission church was no longer exclusively one of newly baptized Tarahumaras. On the other hand, it makes clear that it was the act of baptizing gentile natives on the frontier that justified the continued existence of the entire mission enterprise.

To conclude: the old mission frontier idea emerged out of a history of Spanish colonial expansion that was posited in the necessity to occupy territory. The missions were considered crucial in this occupation that extended from the center of the viceroyalty to its outer limits. Consonant with colonial expansion, these ideas were also functional for 19th and 20th century notions of nationalism, for which territorial definitions were basic; therefore the metaphors in historical writings of expanding circles or of stains spreading out from the center. In the case of the missions in northern Mexico, these notions were adopted both north and south of the border with the United States, although with different results for art and architectural history, as I noted at the beginning. In the United States the emphasis was on heroic expansion, epitomized in the missions which had to be characterized as distant and isolated, and in Mexico it was on nationalistic consolidation, so that the missions, precisely because of their distance from the center where “the nation” was being defined, had little place, outside of ecclesiastical history--a significant exception, considering the supra national character of the Roman church and of the Jesuits, in particular.

Our present time is, in many aspects, post-nationalistic, and today art historians interested in exploring artistic geographies are able to see connections that transcend geography defined as territory. Interestingly enough, my discourse has turned out to be not so much about areas or regions, but rather about paths and lines of communication. The interrelationship of this understanding with our contemporary era of globalization and the opening of world wide communication possibilities is obvious. Paradoxically, however, while art historians today can take a world spanning point of view, there is also a pressing need to consider our objects of study within their very local circumstances. The churches and towns of the former Tarahumara missions subsist today in precarious states of preservation and conservation. Whereas art historians in Mexico are deeply concerned about the destruction and loss of national patrimony, which is occurring on a daily and accelerating basis, it is now more than ever impossible to deal with it from an exclusively national base. The art historians from the United States and Europe, who are now becoming ever more interested in Mexican culture, must somehow share our concern and our task. Not to do so is to remain in the anachronistic mode of being merely the consumers of the artistic objects of exotic places, a mode which thinking about artistic geography should be helping us to question.