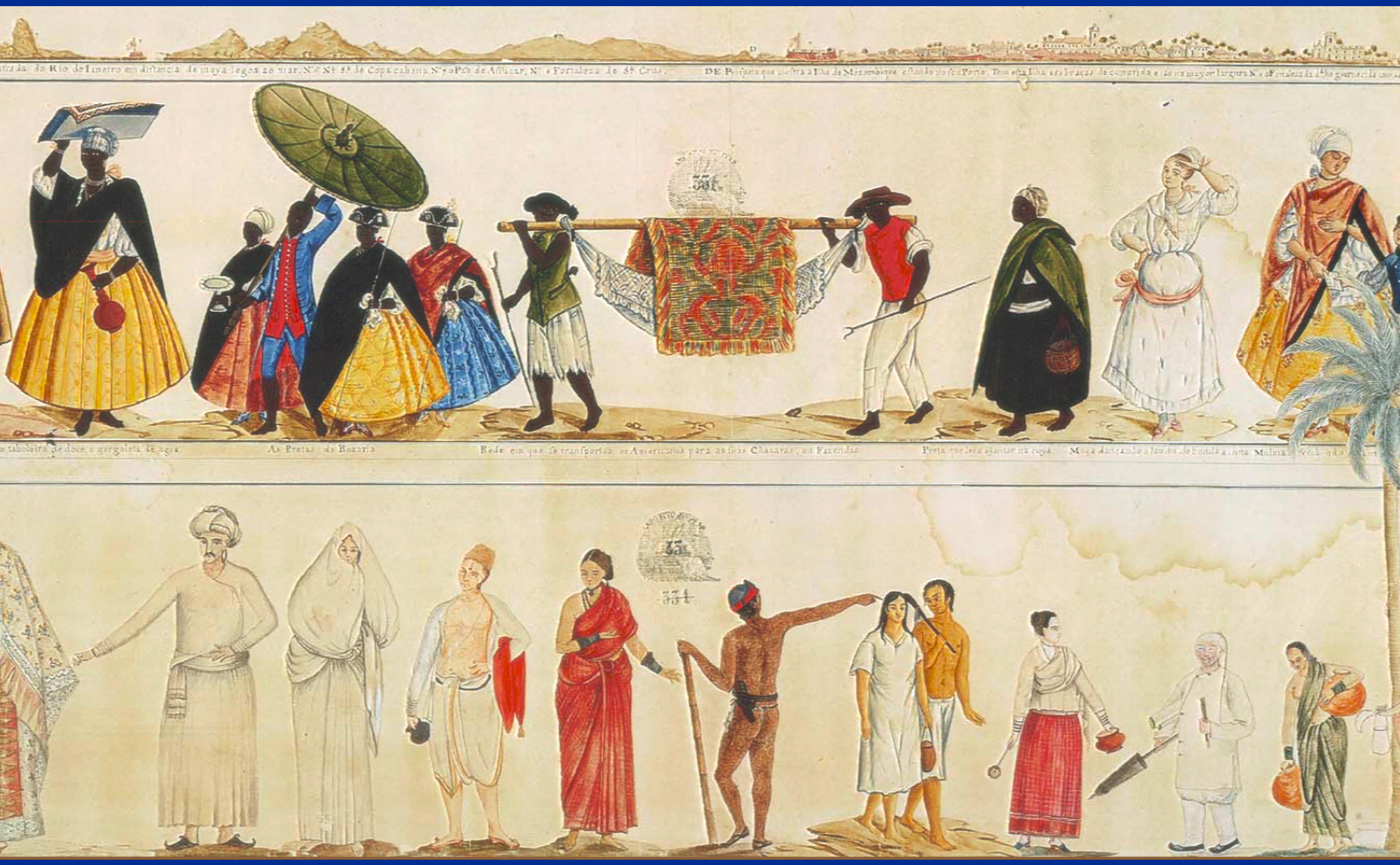
New Worlds: Frontiers, Inclusion, Utopias



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The Power of the Local Site: A Comparative Approach to Colonial Black Christs and Medieval Black Madonnas*

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The art historical discourse on early modern Christian artifacts in colonial Latin America has long been characterized by an emphasis on the European roots of these objects and by their insertion into the tradition of European religiosity. This is particularly true with regard to cult images of Christ and the saints, especially for those around which an unusually fervent religious veneration evolved. In the more recent past, scholars have begun acknowledging the non-European roots of artifacts of colonial visual culture by labeling them with adjectives such as "hybrid" or "syncretic." However, by doing so, they tacitly imply that the European visual culture imported during the early modern period was, in contrast, monolithic, canonical, and certainly orthodox. In this paper, I would like to show that the visual culture that developed in medieval Europe was no less "hybrid" or "syncretic" than that which evolved during colonial times in Latin America. By doing so, I propose a methodological approach to early modern visual culture that contributes to "de-colonizing" art history by considering European and colonial visual culture within a single framework, which allows us to trace parallel developments while acknowledging fundamental differences between the two. Here I take as examples two visual types: the so-called "Black Christs" of early colonial Mesoamerica and the "Black Madonnas" of the High Middle Ages in Europe, whose particular "darkness" has been explained by scholars in surprisingly similar ways. "

The devotion to Black Christs that developed in the Spanish Americas presumably starting in the sixteenth century is a case in which the quest for antecedents in European visual culture is particularly unpromising. Whereas an army of Black Christs is dispersed over the territories of the former Spanish colonies, in Europe, the occurrence of these figures is very rare.[1] By contrast, several hundred Black Madonnas have been counted in Europe; these are, however, very scarse in the Spanish Americas.[2] While attempts to trace the dark coloration of the Latin American "Cristos Negros" to prototypes from Europe are doomed to

1 The few exceptions include the famous Volto Santo in Lucca, Italy; the Black Christ in the Cathedral of St. Flour, France (which, however, might not have acquired its dark coloration before the mid-ninteenth century); and Queen Jadwiga's crucifix in the Wawel Cathedral in Krakow, Poland.

2 I am well aware that the "Queen and Patroness" of Brazil, Nossa Senhora Aparecida, is a Black Madonna. However, I have chosen to constrain the scope of my comparative analysis to the cultural ambits of Europe and Mesoamerica.

failure, correlations between the two continents and their visual cultures emerge on a different level. Scholars have analyzed both Mesoamerican Black Christs and medieval Black Madonnas by linking the figures' color to the particular geographical location in which their devotion initially took root. In both cases, the reasoning is based on the proximity of the Christian cult images to sites of pre-Christian worship, very often centering on caves. Thus, instead of the unidirectional lines of influence that one might expect where colonial art is concerned, parallel developments emerge in the adoption of non-Christian elements linked to particular geographical settings.

The "Local" and the "Global" and a Non-Eurocentric Approach to Art History

This observation calls for some methodological reevaluation. In order to simultaneously grasp both the dimensions of missionary activity and the impact unfolded by the protagonists of the evangelization process who claimed universal truths on the one hand and the agency of local actors and the enduring power of traditions on the other, it is useful to consider the concept of "glocalization" as it has been employed by sociology.[3] Roland Robertson was among the first to use this notion, which was originally developed in the field of business studies in the 1980s, in a sociological context. In writing that "globalization—in the broadest sense, the compression of the world—has involved and increasingly involves the creation and incorporation of locality, processes which themselves largely shape, in turn, the compression of the world as a whole,"[4] he stresses that, in the past and in the present, the "local" and the "global" converge.

Borrowing from Robertson, Paolo Aranha has recently suggested adapting the concept of "glocalization" to the description of the local conditions of "global" missionary activity, thus transforming it into a useful tool for historical analysis. I would like to build on his proposition to aim for "a more comprehensive interpretation of the missions which is able to relate the departure and the destination, the message of salvation and the

3 In her paper given at the CIHA conference in Rio de Janeiro, August 25–29 2015, Margit Kern also proposed an approach to art history centered on the notion of "glocalization."

4 Roland Robertson, "Glocalization: Time-Space and Homogeneity-Heterogeneity," in *Global Modernities,* ed. Mike Featherstone, Scott Lash, and Roland Robertson, (London: Sage Publications, 1995): 40.

concrete environment where it was supposed to be implanted, the European clerics and the non-European 'pagans' whose conversion was sought"[5] and suggest broadening the range of historical phenomena to be considered from this angle. In a colonial setting, it appears sensible to adopt such a perspective not only when considering missionary activity in a narrow sense, but also when examining Christian cult images in general. For regardless of the circumstances under which concrete instances of images venerated in a Christian context might have been created, they may generally be considered the result of an initial effort of evangelization undertaken by the protagonists of an "imported" religion striving for dominance over existing belief systems, which they aimed at eradicating, and claiming universal truths meant to be spread among a local population believed to consist of "heathens."

As we will see, in the case of Mesoamerican Black Christs, local "pagan" religious worship led to a fundamental reinterpretation of the visual culture brought to the "New World" from Spain. In a similar, but somewhat converse, mode, local traditions were influential in bringing about the medieval Black Madonnas in Europe. To examine this latter process, which took place during the initial development of a European Christian visual culture, let us consider the most convincing scholarly explanation for the dark coloration of these Marian representations.[6]

5 Paolo Aranha, "'Glocal' Conflicts: Missionary Controversies on the Coromandel Coast Between the XVII and XVIII Centuries," in *Evangelizzazione e Globalizzazione: Le missioni gesuitiche nell'età moderna tra storia e storiografia*, ed. Michela Catto, Guido Mongini, and Silvia Mostaccio (Città di Castello: Società Editrice Dante Alighieri, 2010): 80.

6 This is not to state that all medieval Black Madonnas' dark coloration may be accounted for by applying the same explanatory pattern. Sophie Cassagnes-Brouquet, *Vierges Noires. Regard et Fascination* (Rodez: Editions du Rouergue, 1990), 169-181; Gude Suckale-Redlefsen, "Schwarze Madonnen," in *Schöne Madonnen am Rhein*, ed. Robert Suckale, (Leipzig: E. A. Seemann, 2009), 171–173; and Jeanette Favrot Peterson, *Visualizing Guadalupe. From Black Madonna to Queen of the Americas* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014), 32–35, provide good overviews of the different clusters of explanations as advanced by scholarship with regard to the genesis of the Black Madonnas' darkness and of their respective validity. Compelling evidence points to the superimposition of Christian shrines upon sanctuaries dedicated to female divinities of pre-Christian religions that were considered black. This set of explanations is repudiated by certain authors who reprove of the alleged underlying archetypal assumptions. However, links between medieval Black Madonnas and "pagan" mother goddesses may be established on the basis of strong archeological evidence.

The "Black Madonnas" of Medieval Europe

In examining Black Madonnas,[7] the perception of the effigies as dark, which rests upon their sharp contrast with the light-skinned renderings of Mary that predominated in medieval Europe and beyond, is decisive. The earliest mentions of Black Madonnas in chronicles occur in the later Middle Ages. Archeological evidence points to a corpus of statues initially meant to be dark, which may be considered to be the group of historically authentic Black Madonnas.[8] These all date back to the eleventh to thirteenth centuries and often correspond to the type of the Virgin and Child in Majesty. While innumerable "black" Madonnas that acquired their dark coloration at a later date—either as the result of environmental influences such as candle soot, or due to a deliberate subsequent "blackening" of the statues—weren't originally meant to be black, they were often used to replace "authentic" Black Madonnas that had been lost or damaged.[9]

Medieval Black Madonnas mostly appeared in Western Europe, where they were particularly numerous in France. Here, a certain concentration may be observed in the southern part of the country and they were distributed at regular intervals along the great pilgrimage routes, along the paths formerly employed by Greek merchants, and at the locations of the most important sites used by the Gauls.[10] Moreover, Black Madonnas were frequently bound to certain (often natural) settings such as elevated spaces, sources, wells, or caves. Such a connection to particular geographical settings reoccurs in the legends that narrate their miraculous discovery: often, they are said to have

7 By this, I designate statues only, as the two-dimensional renderings of Mary that are also often termed "Black Madonnas" follow a different tradition (cf. Cassagnes-Brouquet, *Vierges Noires*, 18).

8 Whether their darkness resulted from deliberate blackening or from the deliberate use of dark materials such as ebony or black stone seems irrelevant for the discussion of this phenomenon.

9 For this reason, I would like to caution against the tendency to exclude these statues from the discussion of this phenomenon and to adopt an all too narrow definition of what a "Black Madonna" might be. For historical and archeological findings on Black Madonnas cf. E. Saillens, *Nos vierges noires. Leurs origines* (Paris: Les Éditions Universelles, 1945); Cassagnes-Brouquet, *Vierges Noires*; Jean Hani, *La Vierge Noire et le Mystère marial* (Paris: Guy Trédaniel Éditeur, 1995), 15–44; and Suckale-Redlefsen, "Schwarze Madonnen"; cf. also Ean Begg, *The Cult of the Black Virgin* (London and New York: Arkana, 1985).

10 Cf. the map showing the distribution of black statues of the Virgin in ca. 1550 in France in Saillens, *Nos vierges noires*.

been "found" either under the earth, in a tree, in a flowering bush, in a spring, in a lake, etc.

Let us consider the Black Madonna of Notre-Dame-du-Puy as a particularly illustrative example. The statue was burned by French revolutionaries in 1794, and it has since been claimed that found in its ashes was a stone consecrated to the Egyptian goddess Isis, for which the statue had served as a reliquary. Although an Egyptian origin of the statue can be ruled out today,[11] dealing with the beginnings of Marian devotion in Europe is worthwhile.

As is well known, it was only after the councils of Ephesus in 431 and Chalcedon in 451 that the veneration of Mary was fully permitted. In spite of Emperor Theodosius' proclamation of Christianity as the state religion of the Roman Empire in 380, at that time, numerous other, polytheistic beliefs persisted throughout Europe. The beliefs and cults that generated the greatest fervor were those dedicated to the different manifestations of a deity known as the "great mother" or "mother of the Gods." Presumably, the veneration of this divinity persisted alongside that of Mary until Marian devotion finally replaced the former. In the era of transition to Christianity, many attributes of the pagan "mother goddess" were assigned to Mary.

The similarity between representations of the "mother goddess" and those of Mary is particularly striking with regard to a number of small-scale statues made for domestic purposes that correspond to the type of the "Virgin and Child." These statues represent both Greco-Roman and Celtic deities, all of which were considered chthonic because, by virtue of their femininity, they were regarded as encompassing sources of fecundity. In Western Europe, the following manifestations of the "great mother" of the Greco-Roman religion were occasionally venerated through black effigies: Demeter (Ceres), Cybele, Isis, and Artemis (Diana). Even more important in fostering devotion toward Black Madonnas in medieval Europe, however, were the Celtic goddesses who enjoyed a special veneration in Gaul. In

11 In 1777, upon a careful examination of the Black Madonna of Notre-Dame-du-Puy, Faujas de Saint-Fond ascribed an Egyptian origin to it. His theory seemed confirmed when, in 1794, a stone covered with Egyptian hieroglyphs was found near the location where the ashes of the statue, which had been burnt shortly before, had been scattered. Cassagnes-Brouquet, *Vierges Noires*, 157–158, however, presents several arguments againt this theory.

France, small-scale statues of Gaulish mother goddesses such as Belisama, Regantona, Brigantia, Brigit, Ana and Dana have been found in caves.

Ana, who was considered a black goddess, was often replaced by the figure of St. Anne, the mother of Mary, in local worship. But in many cases, Mary herself came to replace the Celtic Ana. For instance, Le Puy, where the aforementioned Black Madonna was burned by revolutionaries, was the most important region for the veneration of the Celtic Ana and was named "Anicium" in Gallo-Roman times and "Podium Aniciense"[12] in the tenth century. Indeed, at two out of the three most important medieval locations for the veneration of Black Madonnas in France, Chartres and Le Puy, a former veneration of the Celtic black Ana may be observed.[13]

The very name of the Black Madonna of Notre-Dame de Sous-Terre in Chartres may be understood as alluding to a cave, a location central to the rites associated with certain of the previously mentioned mother deities. Like many other Black Madonnas, this statue bears the inscription "Virgo paritura" ("the Virgin who is to give birth"), which refers back to the Celtic tradition as it has been accredited by medieval sources. For instance, the charters of the cathedral state that, 100 years B.C., at this very location, druids had erected a temple dedicated to "the Virgin who is to give birth," as well as a statue of a virgin with child, that was believed to have performed many miracles. According to the different traditions, the "Magna mater" was always a virgin thought to have given birth to a divine child.[14]

Black virgins are frequently venerated in crypts or grottos. As the famous Madonna in Chartres shows, aside from their color, even their names sometimes testify to their chthonic origins. It is very likely that Mary inherited the chthonic cults of antique divinities associated with the fertility of the soil such as Persephone, whose dark effigies were blackened by long sojourns under the earth. Among those divinities invoked for their pow-

12 Anis was another appellation of Ana.

13 Hani explains that Celtic traditions were also paramount in establishing the cult of Mary in the third most important site, Rocamadour. Cf. Hani, *La Vierge Noire et le Mystère marial*, 30–36.

14 Cf. Cassagnes-Brouquet, *Vierges Noires*, 47–49 and 142–146; Hani, *La Vierge Noire et le Mystère marial*, 36–37.

ers of fecundation and parturition that Mary came to replace appears Isis, who seems to have conferred her potency upon the Black Virgin of Notre-Dame de la Daurade in Toulouse: the belt worn by this virgin, which is also an attribute of the Egyptian goddess Isis, is ascribed the power of ensuring quick and painless births.[15]

The veneration toward medieval Black Madonnas in Europe, which probably began well before the eleventh century, can thus convincingly be interpreted as a Christianized version of the devotion to black virgins central to Greco-Roman religiosity and to Celtic priesthood.[16] Mary, proclaimed *theotokos* (the "Bearer of God") on the occasion of the Council of Ephesus, was considered to have provided the flesh necessary for the incarnation of God to occur. It is very likely that the authentic medieval Black Madonnas were meant to stress her prolific qualities, thus echoing the dark statues of female divinities they replaced, whose fecund aspects were symbolized by the darkness of the fertile ground.

The medieval Black Madonnas are a case in point that demonstrates how local factors—traditional forms of religious worship bound to certain geographical conditions—shaped the process of Christianity's ascension to the dominant religion of the European continent. Thus the "global" ambitions of the new

15 The veneration of Isis, which was adopted by the Romans, was introduced in Gaul by merchants from the Mediterranean basin. Hera, the wife of Zeus and the divinity of mariage, was ascribed the same attribute and the same power. Cf. Cassagnes-Brouquet, *Vierges Noires*, 151–157.

16 As convincingly argued by Hani, *La Vierge Noire et le Mystère marial*, 40, the time gap separating the known statues representing "pagan" goddesses, dating to the first centuries A.D., and the much later "apparition" of the medieval Black Madonnas in the eleventh and twelfth centuries may be explained by analyzing the attitude of the Church toward three-dimensional effigies, which shifted during the Middle Ages. Between the fifth and the tenth century, the Church disapproved of statues of the saints and tried to eradicate all remnants of "pagan" cults. During this period, the statues of "pagan" mother goddesses were certainly hidden. When the Church slowly began accepting statues around the mid-eighth century, these images began to "reappear" in the locations where the corresponding cults had formerly been centered: in sources, in caves, in sacred trees, etc. These were now "Christianized" and could thus contribute to the development of the medieval Black Madonnas as we know them today. Hani's reasoning roughly corresponds to that of Beate Fricke, "Fallen idols and Risen Saints: Western Attitudes toward the Worship of Images and the 'Cultura Veterum Deorum'," in *Negating the Image. Case Studies in Iconoclasm*, ed. Anne McClanan and Jeff Johnson (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 66–95, who stresses the continuity between antique statues of emperors and gods, "especially Gaulish mother-earth-types," and Christian imagery and concludes that (p. 80) "the new use of monumental sculpture in western Christianity by the end of the ninth century is the fruit of the reconsiderations of western roots reaching back to the imagery of Late Antiquity and the extensive debates on idolatry."

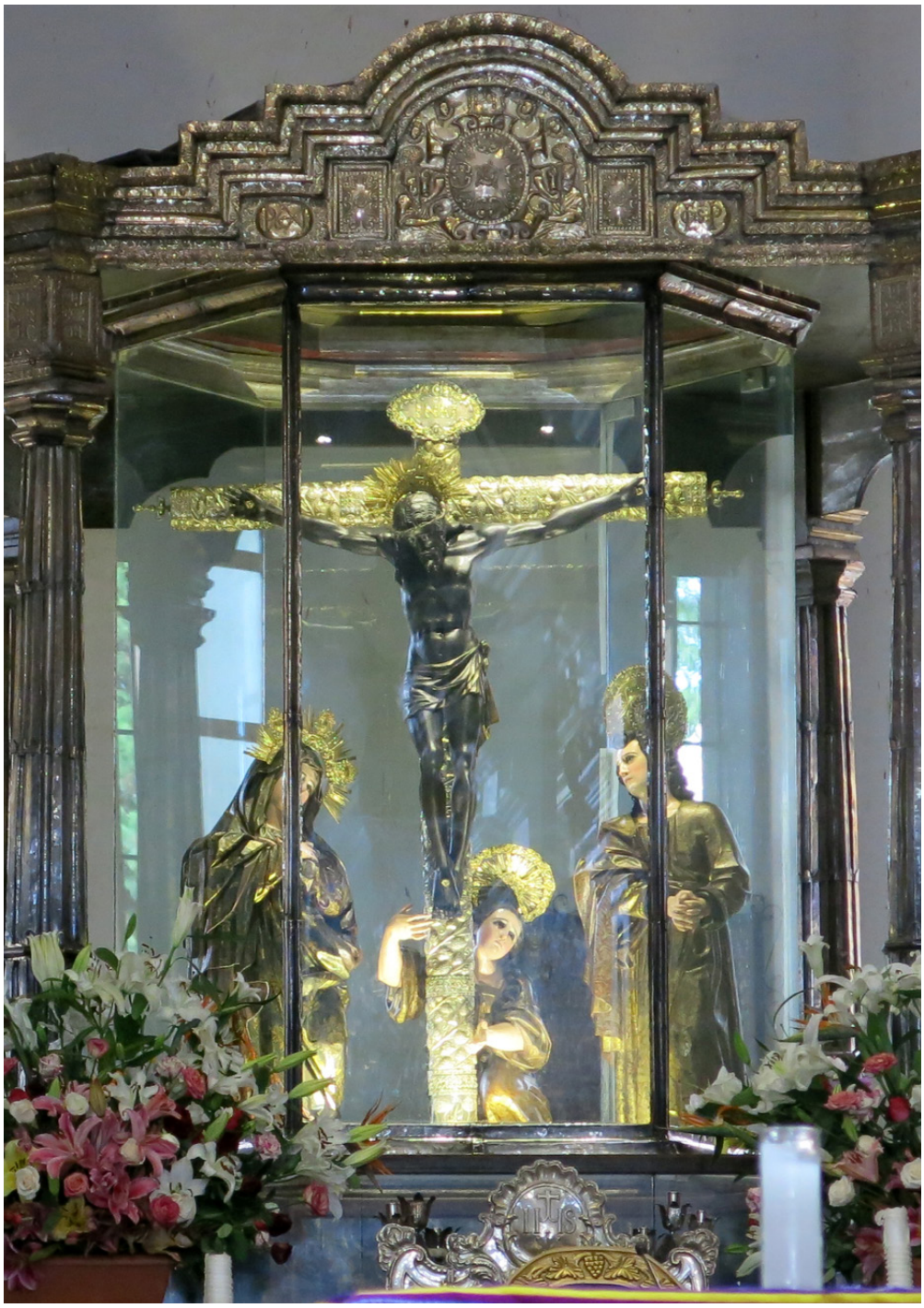
Christian religion—if its universal claim for saving souls may be characterized in this way—were impacted by local determinants during the initial formative stages of Christian visual culture in Europe. It can be surmised that the effigies of earlier belief systems were integrated into Christianity through an act of reinterpretation,[17] meaning that, in dealing with medieval Black Madonnas, we witness nothing less than the integration of an originally "pagan" system of representation—that of three-dimensional sculpture—into Christianity. This reveals just how "hybrid" and "syncretic" the later dominant model of Christian visual culture was, dating to its very beginnings in medieval Europe. Let us now turn to the evangelizing process as it took place in the colonies of the "New World" and see what parallels can be drawn between both continents.

The "Black Christs" of Colonial Mesoamerica

In accordance with the dark effigies of Mary discussed above, the devotional works referred to as "Cristos Negros" in popular or sometimes even in official Church texts in the regions of the former Spanish colonies display skin tones varying from dark brown to ebony. Scholarly accounts commonly attribute the coloration of Black Christs to indigenous influence.[18] Indeed, in Mesoamerica, of the most important images of Black Christs that are reputed to perform miracles, approximately seven display a strong link with indigenous culture that reaches back to the sixteenth century. Moreover, these images are either located in rural areas or were originally located there.

17 Among the examples mentioned by Hani, *La Vierge Noire et le Mystère marial*, 27–36, the black statue of Isis in the church of Saint-Germain-des-Prés in Paris deserves special attention: he reports it was venerated as a Marian representation until its destruction in 1514.

18 For a brief overview of how different authors have established this link, especially with regard to the "Lord of Esquipulas" in Guatemala, cf. Miles Richardson, "Clarifying the Dark in Black Christs: The Play of Icon, Narrative, and Experience in the Construction of Presence," *Yearbook. Conference of Latin Americanist Geographers* 21 (1995): 113. Richardson adopts an interpretation centered on the model of intertextuality and thus opens up another perspective. However, his analysis doesn't answer the question of why dark Christs are mostly prevalent in Latin America and almost unknown to Europe, which shows just how important it is to account for the specific historical, local context in dealing with these icons. Peterson's analysis of the dark coloration of Mesoamerican crucifixes centers on the idea that enduring connotations of darkness determined the perception of these statues as sacred. Cf. Jeanette Favrot Peterson, "Perceiving Blackness, Envisioning Power: Chalma and Black Christs in Colonial Mexico," in *Seeing Across Cultures in the Early Modern World*, ed. Jeanette Favrot Peterson and Dana Leibsohn (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), 49–71.



1. Señor de Esquipulas, Basílica del Santo Cristo de Esquipulas, Guatemala, 2014. Photo by the author.

Jeanette Peterson has analyzed why the veneration of statues of Christ—especially of those of Black Christs—flourished at sites associated with pre-Columbian male deities. In pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica, black skin coloration was perceived as the unmistakable sign of a particularly honorable and powerful status. It evoked the supernatural powers pertaining to a number of supreme male deities and denoted shamanic vision, centeredness, and sovereignty. The black color of these gods was considered a sign of their healing powers and of their capacity to predict the future. In Nahuatl, a linguistic connection even seems to exist between darkness and godhead. During certain religious rituals, Aztec priests anointed their skin with a soot

containing unguent in order to pay tribute to these gods and to capture the healing and visionary powers associated with their black coloration. Black skin also pointed to the process of "deification"—the transformation into a god and back again—undergone during religious rites.[19]

Regardless of the hostile attitude toward dark skin tones deployed by colonial authorities, in Mesoamerica, since the seventeenth century or even earlier,[20] Black Christs rank among the most highly esteemed Christian cult images. The most prominent example of a figure of Christ uncontestably considered "black" in this area is the Señor de Esquipulas in Guatemala (Fig. 1), which has been copied innumerable times.[21] While the Señor de Chalma, Mexico's second most important cult image after the Virgin of Guadalupe, bears no evidence of any dark coloration now, this figure still counts among the miraculous Black Christs and is perceived as one to date. Owing to the environmental conditions to which the statue was exposed in the cave where legends claim it "appeared," the original crucifix was dark. As Peterson points out, the real and the alleged black color of the Señor de Chalma must be considered in connection with the tradition of religious worship in caves, which was widespread throughout Mesoamerica and continued well into colonial times.[22]

19 Peterson, "Perceiving Blackness, Envisioning Power: Chalma and Black Christs in Colonial Mexico," passim.

20 Cf. for instance Francisco de Florencia, *Descripción historica y moral del yermo de S. Miguel de la Cuevas en el Reyno de Nueva-España, y Invencion de la Milagrosa Imagen de Christo nuestro Sr. Crucificado, que se venera en ellas* (Cádiz: 1689), 16: Francisco de Florencia, who was in Chalma in 1683, describes the veneration of the original crucifix, which he considers to have been "denegrido".

21 Cf. Stephan Francis de Borhegyi, "The cult of Our Lord of Esquipulas in middle America and New Mexico," *El Palacio* 61,12 (1954): 387–401; Carl Kendall, "The Politics of Pilgrimage: The Black Christ of Esquipulas," in *Pilgrimage in Latin America*, ed. N. Ross Cumrine and Alan Morinis (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991), 139–156; *En la diáspora de una devoción. Acercamientos al estudio del Cristo Negro de Esquipulas,* ed. Carlos Navarrete Cáceres (México D.F.: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Instituto de Investigaciones Antropológicas, 2013).

22 Local worshippers and the media still refer to this image, which replaces an earlier, darker effigy destroyed by fire most likely in the late seventeenth or early eighteenth centuries, by using the title of "Black Christ of Chalma" today. Since the eighteenth century, textual and visual descriptions of this effigy fluctuate between darkness and brightness. Peterson, "Perceiving Blackness, Envisioning Power: Chalma and Black Christs in Colonial Mexico," convincingly argues that the dark coloration of the original crucifix became an integral part of its numinous power.

In fact, several Black Christs have links to caves: the Señor de Chalma and the Cristo Negro of Tila in Chiapas[23] are both reported to have appeared in caves, while the sanctuary of the Señor de Esquipulas in Guatemala is located near two cruciform caverns showing signs of centuries-long ritual use. In ancient Mesoamerica, caves were considered "topographic shrines" marking the center of a community and charging a particular location with sacrality. They were the destination of long religious processions. Colonial authorities were well aware of the dangerous draw of these caves and tried to redirect or eradicate the veneration that took place there. The apparition legend of the Señor de Chalma attests to the "replacement" of an image perceived by the colonizers as an "idol" with a statue of Christ and thus demostrates the assimilative process at work in keeping to established sacred geography.[24]

Surprising parallels emerge when the most convincing theories explaining the darkness of medieval Black Madonnas and colonial Black Christs are juxtaposed. Even though their coloration may be linked to preexisting religious cults, neither the Black Madonnas' nor the Black Christs' blackness lead back to one specific "black" deity. Rather, in both cases, a whole range of precursors emerges, which vary from one site to the other. In the case of the Black Madonnas, the dark coloration of the statues seems connected to the darkness of the fertile ground, which was decisive in conferring upon effigies of pre-Christian goddesses a black tonality well before Christianization took place. With regard to the Black Christs, a more general connotation of blackness appears to have been decisive, one connected to centeredness and wellbeing. Associated with sacred sites such as caves, this connotation could easily be transferred to Christ as the new patron of such a location.

23 Cf. J. Kathryn Josserand and Nicholas A. Hopkins, "Tila y su Cristo Negro: historia, peregrinación y devoción en Chiapas, México," *Mesoamérica* 49 (2007): 82–113; Carlos Navarrete Cáceres, "El santuario de Tila y su Cristo Negro, apuntes etnohistóricos," in *En la diáspora de una devoción*, 101–168.

24 For the apparition legend and its variations, cf. Peterson, "Perceiving Blackness, Envisioning Power: Chalma and Black Christs in Colonial Mexico," 57–59.

Different Connotations of Darkness on Both Sides of the Atlantic

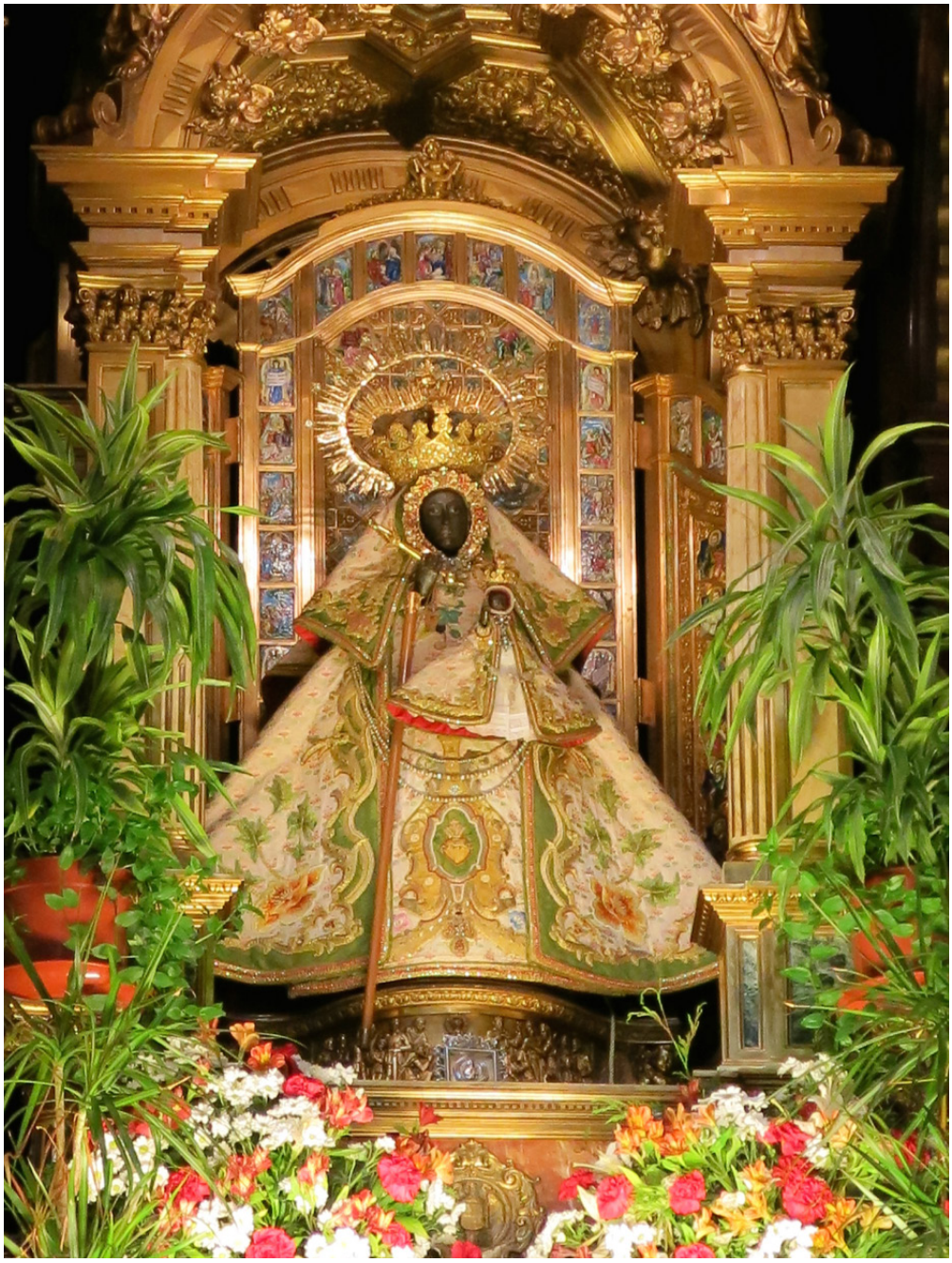
What conclusions may be drawn from this material for the project of developing novel forms of approaching art history? I would like to suggest that comparison of the interplay of "local" and "global" factors in generating visual cultures in different regions of the world can be fertile in developing a non-Eurocentric view on art history geared toward capturing the specificity of visual cultures around the globe.

Indeed, when we examine the very similar processes of assimilation of older traditions which we have observed with respect to both medieval Black Madonnas and to colonial Black Christs, the following question arises: why is the dark coloration restricted to a different holy figure in each geographical area—that of Mary in Europe and that of her son in Mesoamerica? This question seems even more pressing in light of the fact that the Spanish namesake and precursor of the Mexican national symbol of the Virgin of Guadalupe[25] is in fact an authentic medieval Black Madonna (Fig. 2).[26]

It seems that for the emergence of the veneration of black effigies, geared toward Mary in Europe and Christ in Mesoamerica, local conditions were determining factors. As we have seen, the dark coloration of the Black Madonnas may be considered to metaphorically reflect the darkness of the fertile ground, thereby alluding to the fecundity of Mary in giving birth to the Son of God. The nexus between her dark coloration and that of the earth, which parallels the link established by the female

25 In her book *The Black Madonna in Latin America and Europe. Tradition and Transformation* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2007), Malgorzata Oleszkiewicz-Peralba includes the Mexican Virgin of Guadalupe among the so-called "Black Madonnas," thereby stressing the continuity of this phenomenon between Europe and Latin America. I, however, disagree about counting this image among the Black Madonnas and believe the breach between Europe and colonial Mesoamerica should be emphasized as far as these images are concerned. For one thing, the skin tone of the Mexican Virgin of Guadalupe is not nearly as dark as that of the other effigies of Mary considered "Black Madonnas" in this article, and it clearly relies on a different set of premisses. For another, the Mexican icon is a two-dimensional image and not a statue, thus not corresponding to the category of "Black Madonnas" under discussion here.

26 The late twelfth century sculpture of Santa María de Guadalupe in Spain is a seated Virgin in Majesty. Her left hand, which is usually hidden beneath her robes, reveals the wood she is made of, discernible where patches of black coloration have flaked off. On the basis of this evidence, Peterson, *Visualizing Guadalupe*, 28, concludes "that the only and original paint layer was black rather than a lighter 'flesh color,' as has been uncovered on some Black Madonnas."



2. Santa María de Guadalupe, Real Monasterio de Guadalupe, Spain, 2014. Photo by the author.

dark figures of pre-Christian religions whose cults Mary inherited, was evidently based on an anthropological assumption. The belief that man is made from clay is famously formulated in Genesis 2.7, where, in the Hebrew version, the words for farmland (=adamáh) and man (=adám) are punned upon. It was also known to Greco-Roman antiquity.[27]

In early colonial Mesoamerica, where a different set of anthropological assumptions prevailed, this connection could not be established. Indeed, in this cultural ambit, the predominant be-

27 Cf. "Erde," *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum, Sachwörterbuch zur Auseinandersetzung des Christentums mit der antiken Welt, vol. 5: Endelechius–Erfinder*, ed. Theodor Klauser (Stuttgart: Anton Hiersemann, 1962), 1147–1150.

lief was that man is made from maize.[28] Accordingly, among the Aztecs, goddesses were associated with a light yellow-ochre skin color, which females of rank also adopted. Blackness, however, was ascribed almost exclusively to male deities.[29]

I would like to suggest that Mary's "blackness" as it is displayed by the Spanish Guadalupe icon and so many more medieval statues of Mary, did not establish itself in this cultural ambit during the colonial era because assigning a dark coloration to the mother figure of the "new" religion imported by the missionaries simply made no sense to the local populations. However, the medieval Black Madonnas became important precedents for other dark statues—those of the so-called "Cristos Negros." Whether the Black Christs result from indigenous reinterpretation of Christian visual culture or whether they were commissioned by the missionaries who realized that concessions to pre-Columbian belief systems were decisive in converting the encountered populations, blackening these statues seems to have been paramount in securing acceptance and veneration by the indigenous.

In the Spanish colonies, local, geographically defined sites—namely dark caves used for ritual purposes—played a decisive role in assigning the statues of the "new divinity" introduced by Christian missionaries miracle-working powers. As the common locus where Black Madonnas and Black Christs often "appeared," the cave points to polytheistic religious belief systems connected to natural sites on both sides of the Atlantic. The observations made here about how local factors determined the development of a specific Christian visual culture in both Europe and in Mesoamerica show how fertile the comparative analysis of the "local" and the "global" on different continents may be in shaping an art history geared toward an archeology of visual conceptions rather than toward describing the influence of one "dominating" visual system on the realm of territories often assumed to have resembled a *tabula rasa* by Eurocentric approaches to colonial art.

28 Cf. Karl A. Taube, "Maize. Iconography and Cosmological Significance," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Mesoamerican Cultures, The Civilizations of Mexico and Central America, vol. 2*, ed. Davíd Carrasco (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 150–152.

29 Cf. Peterson, "Perceiving Blackness, Envisioning Power: Chalma and Black Christs in Colonial Mexico," 59.

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