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# Magic Screens. Biombos, Namban Art, the Art of Globalization and Education between China, Japan, India, Spanish America and Europe in the 17th and 18th Centuries

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Garcilaso de la Vega el Inca, for several centuries doubtlessly the most discussed and most eminent writer of Andean America in the 16th and 17th centuries, throughout his life set the utmost value on the fact that he descended matrilineally from Atahualpa Yupanqui and from the last Inca emperor, Huayna Cápac. Thus, both in his person and in his creative work he combined different cultural worlds in a polylogical way.<sup>1</sup> Two painters boasted that very same Inca descent – they were the last two great masters of the Cuzco school of painting, which over several generations of artists had been an institution of excellent renown and prestige, and whose economic downfall and artistic marginalization was vividly described by the French traveller Paul Mancoy in 1837.<sup>2</sup> While, during the 18th century, Cuzco school paintings were still much cherished and sought after, by the beginning of the following century the elite of Lima regarded them as behind the times and provincial, committed to an ‘indigenous’ painting style. The artists from up-country – such was the reproach – could not keep up with the modern forms of seeing and creating, as exemplified by European paragons. Yet, just how ‘provincial’, truly, was this art?

The Cuzco school of Painting’s last two great masters, Tadeo Escalante and Marcos Chillitupa Chávez, countered the loss of public goodwill amongst the newly-empowered elites of the early 19th century with continued creativity and an unalterable pride in their Inca genealogy. Outside of Cuzco, though, European travellers would, at most, retain an interest in the depictions of Inca emperors or Andean objects (Ref. 2). It is only during the last few decades that there has been a growing

interest again in the works of these painters, and in their conception of art – a renewed interest due to altered historical and cultural conditions and within the framework of new sensibilities. Back then, the emerging Creole elites of the young independent republic could not make anything of it.

Far away from Lima, in Cuzco itself, things were different. Here, at the beginning of the 19th century, the paintings of the masters still enjoyed the reputation of being a true reflection of their creators' prestige and of adequately representing their high ancestry. Thus, they were regarded as an artistic reinforcement to the claims on the old Inca dynasty. In the 1830s hopes had not yet entirely vanished that the rights of the indigenous population could be strengthened, and that based on these vested rights political claims could be asserted. However, the *independencia* was not a revolution in a European sense. In addition, geo-culturally speaking, transatlantic Europe still exerted its overwhelming dominance, especially with regard to the development of the arts in the former colonies.

The painters of the Cuzco school formed part of a complex, colonial filiation of art that encompassed the entire globe. In later times, they tended to be labelled as 'indigenous painters' or, worse, were classified as belonging to a vague 'Volkskunst'. One of the last creations of the formerly renowned and prestigious school of painters (renowned and prestigious both socially and artistically) is the 'Genealogy of Incas' by Marcos Chillitupa Chávez, from 1837, which, as a matter of fact, is not a framed painting, but a so-called 'biombo' or folding screen. It consists of six parts (each measuring 195 × 75 cm), representing a series of, in total, 18 formidably painted panels. The folding screen, from the private collection of the family Pastor, displays 16 portraits, numbered consecutively, which depict the Inca dynasty, starting from the founder Manco Cápac to Túpac Yupanqui (XI), Huayna Cápac (XII), Huáscar (XIII), and Atahualpa (XIV). Reading from left to right and from top to bottom we are led to the quadrant on the bottom right containing the last portrait, which, quite logically, is the only one depicting a field commander on horseback. It is entitled rather ambiguously 'El Libertador del Perú' (Figure 1).

It is quite striking to see the vastness of the cultural vector field inherent in this masterpiece from 1837. First, there is the genealogy of Inca emperors, culminating in the figure of a liberator/*libertador*. In the context of numerous revolts in the young republic of Peru, then, such representation is clearly associated with political hopes based on the affiliation to and the descent from the ancient prehispanic dynasty. Furthermore, the genealogy is depicted in a colonial painting style, blending European conventions of representation with indigenous and *mestizo* elements, utilizing a medium that is of undeniably Asian provenance. Indeed, the origin of the art of the folding screen leads back to China.

That is also why the term 'biombo' was not derived from any one of the indigenous cultures. Yet, how then could one analyse this truly trans-Andean net of interrelations in a way that necessarily goes beyond the translocal or transregional level? A trans-Andean net of interrelations in which – in the words of Arjun Appadurai<sup>3</sup> – the cultural dimensions of America fuse with those of Europe and Asia? How could we grasp and interpret the obvious *transareal* dimensions<sup>4</sup> of the *Biombo con la genealogía de los incas*?



Figure 1. ‘Genealogy of Incas’ by Marcos Chillitupa Chávez from 1837.

At this point, the Spanish term ‘biombo’ (in German, apart from the Gallicism ‘paravent’, there also is the term ‘spanische Wand’/‘Spanish wall’) could show us the way.<sup>5</sup> This way, or rather these ways, are connected on manifold levels with those boosts of development that quickly reached a global scale, and that can be attributed to the first phase of accelerated globalization<sup>6</sup> particularly within the Pacific region. The term ‘biombo’ originates from the Japanese, was adopted into Portuguese at a time when Portugal still had trading interests in Japan, and soon found its way into the Spanish language, where it succeeded in ousting rivalling terms. Hence, the word ‘biombo’ refers to a worldwide phenomenon, since – to a certain degree – the journeys of the word mirror the journeys of the object thus designated. Linking diverse cultural areas, the travel routes of the word – a Japanese term referring back to the Chinese – thus unfold those routes of knowledge without which the history of the ‘Spanish wall’ on the American continent would remain utterly unintelligible. How did they get to Peru then, both word and object?

The fact that the Portuguese adopted the lexeme ‘biombo’ from the Japanese does not necessarily mean that the folding screen has to be regarded as a Japanese invention, or that it emerged there somewhat endogenously. First and foremost, the Japanese archipelago formed an important hub within the transarchipelagic relations; without it, the success story of the ‘biombo’ on a transpacific and transatlantic scale would be unconceivable.

Mobile and easily shiftable pieces of furniture were first mentioned in Chinese literature of the second century BC; hence, it can be assumed that what in French is called a ‘paravent’ (i.e. a ‘windshield’ or ‘windscreen’) was invented in China. Apparently, it was only in the seventh century CE that the mobile partitions came to Japan. There, however, they quickly became popular, and the local artisans attained a high level of perfection in the artistry of decorating them.<sup>7</sup> Time had not yet arrived for the precious and portable pieces of furniture to conquer the world from Japan and China, nor had they yet entered the American hemisphere to initiate both unique and transculturally outstanding developments in the field of the arts and in the production

of art works. Such developments would only become possible after the first phase of accelerated globalization had reached the Pacific region and had established new and different connections.

Spanish navigator Miguel de Legazpi had yet to discover a route in 1566 on one of his expeditions to the East, a trade route that would not only connect the Pacific coast of New Spain with the Philippines, but would lead back again to New Spain and its Pacific port Acapulco; Manila, the future capital of the Philippines, had yet to be founded in 1571; and a regular maritime traffic had yet to be established between Acapulco and the Philippines in 1573, a route that would be frequented for over 250 years. Only then could New Spain enter into relations with Japan – Marco Polo's Cipango – and establish a continuous exchange. Once a regular maritime traffic between Manila and Acapulco had been established, the Spanish Empire literally came full circle. Now, the Iberian imperium had at its disposal a network of truly global connections. These were of tremendous importance to Spain's religious, cultural and commercial activities, but not to Iberian interests alone. The highly dynamical phenomenon of the 'biombo' is utterly relevant to illustrate the complexity of these developments within the framework of an emerging global economy.

After continual transpacific trade routes had been established, luxury goods of Asian provenance began to arrive in New Spain – among them, most certainly, folding screens. We will never know for sure, of course, whether the first biombos reaching New Spain, the future Mexico, were of Chinese or of Japanese origin (Ref. 7, p. 11 ff). However, another question is much more pertinent: how can an analysis of the biombos help us comprehend phenomena of worldwide globalization? How can we make productive use of the specific approach the analysis of biombos demands from us: encompassing diverse and mobile perspectives – thus also answering questions on global cohabitation on the level of everyday culture.<sup>8</sup> Owing to its mobile character and its diverse social functions, the 'biombo' can indeed serve as a model, and show us how to transcend a way of thinking that at best is bilateral, thus to reach a more complex level of polylogical relationality.

In his analysis of the worldwide biombo trade, Alberto Baena Zapatero has rightly pointed out that this example of early globalization not only brings into focus the interrelations between four continents (if one includes Africa as embedded in the global network of shipping routes). It also proves that in this matter the traditional distinction between centre and periphery does not make much sense and turns out to be obsolete.<sup>9</sup> Analysing the trade in biombos, one comes across a range of phenomena that one would rather have expected to encounter in a more recent phase of globalization, developments that doubtlessly can also be detected in this early phase (Ref. 9, p. 33). The trade in biombos reveals what Sanjay Subrahmanyam<sup>10</sup> has termed *connected histories*. According to the view expounded in this paper, however, analysis could and should be taken one important step further to attain a transareal dimension.

As far as the worldwide biombo trade is concerned, two routes can be identified: the Portuguese route from Asia via the Cape of Good Hope to Portugal; and the Spanish one via the hub of the Philippines, Acapulco, Veracruz and the Caribbean to





**Figure 2.** Flawlessly executed biombo from the school of Macao, today part of the Museo Sumaya in Mexico City.

Spain. Logically, the latter had a branch route, leading southwards to the Viceroyalty of Peru.<sup>11</sup> The important hub of Manila was called at by Spanish and Portuguese traders, as well as traders from China and Japan. It was a world trade that had only just come into being due to the recent establishment of new transportation routes spanning the globe. For the Portuguese, Macao, Nagasaki and Goa, in particular, formed important centres, as it was from these places that luxury goods of Chinese, Japanese or Indian origin could be shipped to Manila, and thus be brought into circulation along the Spanish global trade routes (Ref. 11, p. 35).

The flawlessly executed biombo from the school of Macao – today part of the collection of the Museo Sumaya in Mexico City – constitutes a superb example of the transcultural vigour of such trade links: its subject matter, the Flood, manifests in a striking way the intertwinement of diverse artistic traditions.<sup>12</sup> Seldom has Noah's ark been placed in a more global context. And seldom has the motif of the ship – upon which the world trade so much depended – found expression in a blend of so diverse filiation: Asian, American and European. At the end of the seventeenth century the members of this artisanal workshop, the 'escuela de china de Macao' (Ref. 12, p. 120), were fully aware of these traditions and knew about the varied viewing habits of a far-flung market, as well as about the forms and the norms of reception and production which they sought to fuse in their transareal artistic work (Figure 2).

Yet, what had created the worldwide demand for folding screens of Chinese or Japanese production in the first place? Without a doubt, a delegation of Japanese

Christians played a decisive role in fuelling the European fascination for such pieces of furniture: in 1585, under the guidance of the Jesuit Diego de Mésquita, they came to meet the Spanish king Philip II as well as Pope Gregory XIII. As gifts, they brought Japanese folding screens. These left a huge impression, not only in the Vatican, but even more so at the Spanish court. As the Spanish court served as a model, the demand for biombos quickly rose at the smaller courts, and in urban centres throughout Europe.

It was not for nothing that, with reference to the folding screen, in the German-speaking area it became customary to speak of the ‘Spanish wall’. Said Spanish ‘wall’, however, was mobile to the utmost degree.

So far, the research on biombos (confined, as it is, to a small number of scholars) has focused on the Japanese rather than the Chinese context, and on New Spain rather than Peru, when it comes to analysing the flows of commerce and aesthetic developments. In the following, we will quickly touch upon these well-researched aspects, before taking a closer look at the Viceroyalty of Peru.

There is one fact of major significance to the very particular development of the biombo in New Spain: in 1638 and 1639 respectively, Japan resolved on and then issued an edict to seal itself off from occidental influence. As a consequence, large numbers of Japanese artists and artisans were forced to leave the archipelago, in particular those who had brought the artful decoration of folding screens to a new height by drawing upon both Far Eastern and Western traditions and pictorial conventions. They had also founded the so-called Namban art.<sup>13</sup> (The term ‘namban’ was used in Japan to denominate the barbarians of the South and here referred to the Europeans.) Consequently, the direct exchange between Japan and New Spain was given a boost. This exchange happened mainly in two ways. First, informally, by way of the galleon trade to Acapulco; second (from 1610 on), via the direct delegations of Japanese shoguns (Ref. 13, p. 295). On the American continent, New Spain turned into the most significant hub, at first just as far as commerce was concerned, but later also as regards the production of biombos. These biombos were shipped to the North, i.e. to Spanish and European markets, but also, and mainly, to the South. The folding screens produced in New Spain served as a model in many ways.

Let us stay for the moment with Namban art, which in recent years has been subjected to an increasingly thorough analysis. For a long time this magnificent art form had almost fallen into oblivion. With Emonsaku leading the way, Japanese artists had brought this art form to the Philippines, and subsequently to New Spain – and thus to the New World, when they settled there. Apparently, several of these artists, via Acapulco, also went to more southern regions of the Spanish colonial empire. However, the present state of research is of rather provisional a nature, remains fairly vague, and leaves much to be desired, especially as far as Peru is concerned.

The Namban school had an astonishing and lasting impact upon art in New Spain, on the intersection of important trade routes North-to-South and West-to-East. Such impact was pioneered by the accomplished painter Kano Domi, who was probably the first Namban artist to arrive in the Viceroyalty (Ref. 13, p. 297). With regard to



TransArea Studies, Namban art can be of the greatest interest. As it is, TransArea Studies focus on processes of a global scope, and the routes of exchange and transformation that link diverse cultural areas, without an immediate centre. Without a scientific approach like this, even the specific space in which European art, literature and culture moved could hardly be described and determined. For TransArea Studies then, Namban art constitutes a very attractive field of research because here we find a complex network of intercultural and transcultural interrelations that can be analysed both in a paradigmatic or programmatic way, proceeding from a history of motion. However, it should not be forgotten that for a long time no one displayed an interest in Namban art, neither the specialists of Japanese art nor those of colonial Spanish or European art. A static academic system with fields of study neatly sorted into clear-cut (and thus isolated) disciplines has failed to face the challenge of tackling Namban art. Thus, it fell through the cracks of specialized research. Still, between Asian, American and European pictorial traditions, Namban works of art are riveting testimonials of an artistic creativity that is characterized by its crossing of different cultures. The way Namban artists expressed themselves in New Spanish paintings of the 17th and 18th centuries had a profound and paradigmatic influence on artists in other parts of colonial Spain, especially in Santa Fé de Bogotá, in Quito and Lima. They also have a paradigmatic significance for TransAreal studies in general, and in particular for trans-Andean studies.

The situation in New Spain exemplifies that it is well justified to speak of a fundamental transculturation in the artistic field, as the *biombos* were decorated in a style that incorporated diverse pictorial traditions. Thus, the viceroyalty, as part of the Spanish Empire, not only fulfilled an important North-South function within the Americas, next to serving as a West–East bridge between the archipelagos of the Caribbean and the Philippines. In fact, its network of interrelations encompassed the globe. This network found its possibly most concise artistic expression in the New Spanish *biombos*, as they blended Asian, American, and European perspectives that stimulated and inspired each other. Thus, New Spain served as an important hinge and had an intermediary function in the exchange with the Viceroyalty of Peru.

Acapulco soon became the main trans-shipment point for luxury goods – and for *biombos* – for the entire American continent. Although the export of goods between the different viceroyalties was forbidden, a considerable number of *biombos* of Chinese, Japanese or domestic viceregal production were shipped from New Spain to Lima. To this end, advantage could be taken of the large number of vessels that shuttled between Lima or other ports on the Western coast and the New Spanish coast; on the way up North they were laden with precious metals; on their way south they carried European and luxury goods, which had just arrived from Manila by way of galleon.<sup>14</sup>

It was a common practice, especially among Peruvian traders, to trans-ship goods in other ports or to smuggle directly. Thus, they tried to satisfy the high demand for *biombos* in the households of wealthy people throughout the viceroyalty. Oftentimes, this happened with the consent or even the active complicity of the highest

government bodies, as when in 1697 in the port of Acapulco luxury goods were transferred to the vessel of the viceroy, the Conde de Cañete, who was just about to sail to Peru (Ref. 14, p. 54). Increasingly, biombos of New Spanish production were shipped, or indeed smuggled, not only to Europe, but also in considerable quantities to South America. In today's Peru, one can still find a rather large number of such New Spanish biombos, which proves that within the inner American trade New Spain not only played an essential role as a transshipping point, but also as a production site of biombos (Ref. 14, p. 54).

The 'four parts of the world' constituted a highly popular motif for the New Spanish biombos.<sup>15</sup> This does not come as a surprise, when taking into account the global trade routes along which the biombos were transported and brought to market. Recurring to this motif, the Creoles could present themselves as universally educated, or even more, as a truly universal elite. The motif had its reverberations, and cropped up as well in other ateliers, which soon began to emerge in the capitals of the American colonies. Although Creoles (Spaniards born in the American colonies) were shut out from political, administrative and clerical positions, the fields of culture and the arts were open to them. These offered a wide array of opportunities to legitimate the Creoles' claims to power, and to invent and present their own (i.e. positive) criteria of differentiation in a remarkable manner. The Creole elite had a thorough interest in founding their own ateliers and manufactures in addition to the existing Asian ateliers, which were integrated into the transpacific and transatlantic trade. Thus, they sought to satisfy the rising demand for this piece of luxury furniture in their various vicerealties and *audiencias*. Apparently, and notwithstanding the exorbitant prizes, there was a sustained demand for biombos of high artistic quality for quite an extended period of time. Hence, it is to be assumed that the purchasers were extremely affluent.

The following aspect can only be touched upon. But it goes without saying that on these pieces of furniture for the colonial social elite, domestic artists, next to the motives traditionally found on Chinese, Japanese, or New Spanish biombos, were also expected to represent local or regional subjects. Apparently, different regions of the colonial empire developed their own predilections and lines of tradition. This shows that the circulation of luxury goods and objects of social representation is not at all an abstract phenomenon of an early world trade. This is because the artistic advances in this respect were of an impressive thematic diversity and aesthetic autonomy.

Two aspects should be kept in mind: on the one hand, the biombos produced in the realm of colonial Spain, and in particular those from South America, often represented scenes of daily life in the distinct *virreynatos*, *audiencias* or *capitanías*.<sup>16</sup> In the families of the colonial society biombos were used in a variety of ways, criss-crossing the line between the public and the private spheres. At times, they separated women's space from men's space. In any case, advantage was taken of their mobility. Mobility always constituted the most attractive feature of this luxury good: in the most diverse places biombos served as objects of their owners' social status and representation. Hence, as far as the biombos are concerned, there was a basic tension between

lifestyle and luxury, between occidental and Far-Eastern forms of furniture. Roland Barthes describes this conflictive zone in a volume dedicated to *his* Japan:<sup>17</sup>

Over here, a piece of furniture has an immobile vocation. In Japan, a house is often deconstructed and little more than a mobile element. In the hallway, there is no place with the slightest hint of property, just as in the ideal Japanese house, which lacks furniture (or furniture is sought to be reduced): neither armchair, nor bed, nor table, from where a body could constitute itself as subject (or master) of the room: the center is denied. (What a seething frustration for the occidental human being, who is well equipped everywhere with his armchair, his bed; who is owner of a domestic *place*). The room has no center, and hence, is reversible: You can turn the hallway of Shikidai upside down, and nothing is going to happen – apart from a reversal of up and down and left and right that is without consequence: the content is dismissed without return: one can enter, pass through, or sit down directly on the floor (or on the ceiling, if you turn the picture upside down), there is nothing to take hold of.<sup>18</sup>

The scenes represented on the precious biombos offer a glimpse of daily life in colonial times; they depict local or regional particularities, such as the respective fashions, hobbies or musical and gastronomical activities. Special emphasis was given to the recognizability of certain places and streets, parks and fountains. These constituted an urban landscape that formed the background of the costumbristic sceneries. Such landscapes vividly illustrated what was considered a good life, or good government. Often, the cityscapes were complemented by rural scenes. Thus, by way of synecdoche, the subject matter of the biombos was extended to the entire area of the viceroyalty. However, none of these local urban or rural scenes would have been imaginable without the great cultural tradition of China.

Parades and fairs, music and dance, carriages and horses, fashion and local products fulfilled an identificatory function for the social elites: the latter would identify with these urban landscapes of the *ciudad letrada*, be it Santa Fé de Bogotá or Lima.<sup>19</sup> Local artists thus satisfied the need for symbolic goods. Elites from the respective regions of the colonial empire here were given the opportunity to arrange and stage-manage the modalities of both their social and more intimate life, and to represent them on pieces of furniture. These had a representative character indeed, which was of the utmost importance as to the distribution of symbolic capital.

On the other hand, one must not lose sight of the eminently political character of the colonial biombos' artistic depictions. For example, the famous *Biombo de la Conquista* (Figure 3) from the New Spanish Namban tradition clearly reveals elements of Creole self-awareness and self-confidence with respect to historical events.<sup>20</sup> The bloody, and not always heroic, battles between the Spanish and the Aztecs troops were thus kept alive in the consciousness of the Creole elite in New Spain – as it were, beneath the *urbs nova* of viceregal Mexico. Hence, Tenochtitlán remained present in and beneath Mexico City.

In the context of a global network of interrelations – comprising China and Japan as well as Portugal and Spain, but also the viceroyalties of New Spain, New Granada or Peru – the example of the Peruvian *biombo con la genealogía de los Incas* may have shown here how biombos, and in particular those aimed at a public or even political



Figure 3. Biombo de la Conquista.

space, drew on diverse cultural and artistic lines of tradition, following a complex system of combinations. For this is not only about incorporating diverse painting techniques and ways of seeing according to Asian, European and colonial Spanish traditions, and then fusing them with the dominant pictorial objective of the great masters of Cuzco school. Instead, the complex artistic objectives are linked to political objectives. The historical traditions of Tawantinsuyu, the Incan empire, are evoked, and then put into a context of both contemporary and future connotations, where they acquire meanings of political, cultural or social liberation.

This results in a specifically *transareal* vectoricity, magnificently exemplified on the level of material culture – in the mobility of a piece of furniture used in both the public and private space. So in 1837, the art form of biombos culminated in the genealogy of the Incas in the Peruvian Andes: an art form that is characterized by the superimposition of elements from prehispanic history, and from both the first and second phases of accelerated globalization. In this manner, it promoted its vectorial, specifically transpacific and transatlantic objectives. Beyond the focus on a specifically Incan history, the biombo of Marcos Chillitupa Chávez thus displays an unmistakably transareal constellation, whose transcultural vigour as a global art would be inconceivable without China, Japan, or the Philippines.

Translation by Agnes Bethke

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3. Cf. A. Appadurai (1996) *Modernity at Large. Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press).
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20. Cf. O. Ette (2010) *ZusammenLebensWissen. List, Last und Lust literarischer Konvivenz im globalen Maßstab*, pp. 9–19.

### About the Author

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Ette directs the Research Project on ‘Alexander von Humboldt’s American Travel Diaries: Genealogy, Chronology, and Epistemology’ (2014–2017) and, since 2015, an 18-year project on ‘Travelling Humboldt – Science on the Move’ of the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities. Ette has published 18 books and numerous articles. Ette is an Honorary member of the Modern Language Association of America, a member of the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities and of the Leibniz-Sozietät der Wissenschaften zu Berlin, and an Honorary Fellow of the Institute of Modern Languages Research at the University of London School of Advanced Studies. He is a Chevalier dans l’Ordre des Palmes Académiques (France). He has been a member of the Academia Europaea since 2010.