Illustrated Testimonials: Images of Novohispanic Franciscan Martyrs in 18th Century New Mexico

The SOLAS Brown Bag Speaker series presents Emmanuel Ortega, Art History Instructor at University of Nevada - Las Vegas. The pictorial history of Franciscan martyrs is one that belongs to an ongoing process of spiritual conquest which began during the early Christian era. The visual techniques employed by missionary members during the Spanish colonial period in the Americas are some that derive essentially from medieval concepts of vision and spiritual devotion. These included representations of violence that were carried, as mentioned by Anthony McCosker, by “a highly affective visual content.”

In the particular case of New Mexican missions, such concepts were applied in order to create a Bourbon visual landscape of devotion. While many medieval affective visual techniques were applied to the Novohispanic Franciscan martyr canvasses, colonial approaches to the image of the so called “savage” in the edges of empire were to result in a unique genre of painting. One of the main details these images sought to establish was he will of missionary members to die at the service of any given imperial power.

Such will was exploited by medieval and Novohispanic religious orders through a constant exploration of unknown and newly conquered territories. The images of martyrs thus provided the perfect opportunity to narrate a monk’s experience as a spiritual conqueror in estranged lands such as New Mexico in the mid 17th and late 18th centuries. Mendicant orders were in charge of the dissemination of these paintings, and in order for the images to serve their roles as what I call “illustrated testimonials,” their principal display grounds were mostly concentrated in monastic spaces of learning and/or prayer.