

'Contested Visions' unveils contrasting histories of colonial Latin America

Did Spanish conquistadors massacre the Aztec rulers who received them with a gracious welcome in 1521? Or did the Aztec people rise up and kill their rulers for willingly submitting to Spanish rule?

These are the kinds of provocative questions raised by a new art exhibition and a series of related events being mounted by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in collaboration with five UCLA faculty members.

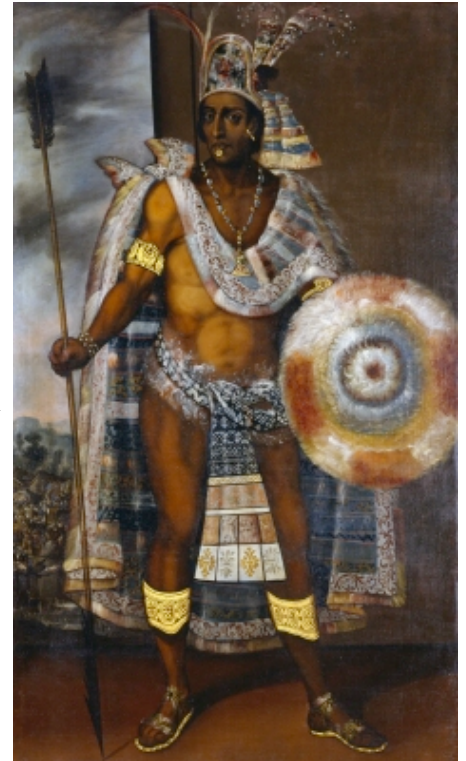
"There were a lot of different points of view and memories of what happened" during the conquest of Latin America, said Kevin Terraciano, a UCLA history professor involved in the project. "And they were recorded in so many different ways that we can see these perspectives today."

The focus of activities is "Contested Visions in the Spanish Colonial World," which is being billed as the first U.S. exhibition to examine the significance of indigenous peoples and cultures within the complex social and artistic landscape of colonial Latin America. The LACMA exhibit amasses nearly 200 works of art and artifacts from Mexico and Peru, which were the target of Spain's colonizing efforts beginning in the 16th century.

Terraciano was part of the advisory committee that helped LACMA curator Ilona Katzew select pieces to include in the exhibit that is on view through Jan. 29, after which the exhibit travels to the National History Museum in Mexico City. Terraciano and UCLA art historian Cecelia F. Klein contributed essays to the exhibit's sumptuous catalog.

Along with UCLA art historian Charlene Villaseñor-Black, they are also participating in a related symposium being organized by Villaseñor-Black, Klein and Katzew. Scheduled for Dec. 2-4, the symposium will take place at LACMA and two UCLA venues — the William Andrews Clark Memorial Library and the Fowler Museum's Lenart Auditorium. Klein, a highly respected authority on Mesoamerican art, is giving the symposium's keynote address at 7:30 p.m. on Dec. 2 in LACMA's Bing Auditorium.

The Clark event will pair performances of 16th-century Spanish dance music with strikingly similar Mexican folk music that persists to this day. Concert organizer Elisabeth C. Le Guin, an associate professor in musicology, said this may be the first time Mexican music is being performed at the library, which specializes in 17th- and 18th-century European culture.



"Portrait of Moctezuma II Xocoyotzin," 1680-91. Photo courtesy Museo degli Argenti, Palazzo Pitti, Polo Muselae Fiorentino. Attributed to Antonio Rodriguez, Mexico, 1636-1691.



The group, Son del Centro, will be performing at the Clark Library in a concert that spotlights 16th-century Spanish dance music and Mexican folk music.

Playing a role in illuminating an exhibit sure to be of great cultural significance to L.A's Latino community is "a real feather in UCLA's cap," said Klein, a professor emeritus of art history. Said LACMA curator Katzew, "I had such a great experience working with UCLA."

A central theme reflected in the exhibition is the stark contrast between the ways in which the indigenous people and the Spanish portrayed the conquest and the foundation of colonial rule, said Terraciano, a kind of textual archaeologist who sifts through books, manuscripts and archival records in Mexico, Europe and the United States for evidence of indigenous accounts from the colonial period. He works with pictographs and alphabetic texts written in Nahuatl — the language of the Aztecs — as well as Zapotec and Mixtec, pre-Columbian Mexican Indian languages still spoken today.

The indigenous perspective shows the Spaniards as aggressors. In a 16th-century indigenous codex featured in the exhibit, armed Spanish military forces are depicted marching into Tenochtitlan, the Aztec capital (now Mexico City). In another indigenous codex, the bodies of Indians are shown scattered around the base of a pyramid after a well-documented massacre at the hands of Spaniards. In yet another codex

discussed in Terraciano's chapter in the catalogue, Spaniards are depicted throwing the corpses of Aztec rulers Moctezuma and Itzquauhtzin into the lake that once surrounded the Aztec capital. In that particular codex, the Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés is wearing a feather in his cap, a sign of power in Aztec culture, Terraciano maintains.

"From the indigenous perspective, they greeted the Spaniards, treated them like royal guests and were suddenly attacked and massacred without provocation," said Terraciano, the director of UCLA's Latin American Institute.

It took more than a century before Spanish and Creole (Spaniards born in the Americas) perspectives emerged in art, Terraciano said. By that time, European histories were being published with a much different spin on events. The official Spanish historian Antonio de Solís insisted in his 1684 "History of the Conquest of Mexico" (one edition is on display at LACMA) that the Aztec people, not the Spaniards, killed Moctezuma, and they did so because he supported Spanish sovereignty.

This version of events is illustrated in one of the exhibit's masterpieces, a vividly painted Japanese-style folding screen with 10 panels that stand almost seven feet high. One side of the screen shows a frenzied mayhem with angry Aztecs attacking Moctezuma as he tries to dissuade them from fighting the Spaniards. The other side depicts an idealized portrait of Mexico City after the conquest. Here, the capital is shown as an orderly and idyllic city filled with plazas, churches, aqueducts and fountains — the end result of the war. The overall effect, Terraciano writes, is to convey a transformation "from a chaotic, crowded site of conflict on one side to a spacious, orderly city on the other ... an emblem of civilization attained in New Spain. "

"Today, we are beginning to appreciate the ways in which indigenous artists and writers challenged the dominant imperial narrative that has influenced all subsequent histories of this event," Terraciano said. "We are also learning exactly how such a dominant narrative was crafted over the course of centuries."

In her keynote address, Klein will discuss the very different, often incompatible ways in which artists and writers in both the New and Old Worlds represented ritual child sacrifice. Although archaeological and textual evidence from the time suggests that child sacrifice was much rarer than portrayed in European accounts, the practice was often cited in Europe as a justification for Spain's activities in the New World. Thus, whereas child sacrifice was depicted only rarely in Mexico and Peru after the conquest, it became a favorite subject of fanciful artistic



One side of a folding screen (above) depicts angry Aztecs attacking Moctezuma as he tries to dissuade them from fighting the Spaniards. The other side (below) shows an idyllic Mexico City after the conquest.

renderings in Europe. The exhibit does not feature the European portrayals, but it does include some Pre-Columbian objects used in these rituals, including Inka figurines of the type that have been uncovered at archaeological excavations of child burials.

If Terraciano's and Klein's efforts draw attention to divergences in Spanish and indigenous portrayals, the other UCLA contributions highlight confluences between the two cultures. In Villaseñor-Black's Dec. 4 symposium presentation, she will discuss how Spanish friars succeeded in transferring devotion from Aztec deities to Catholic saints. Her talk will focus on the ways in which devotion to Toci, an Aztec deity associated with childbirth, came to be transferred to St. Ann, a Catholic saint associated with birth practices.

"At the time, friars reported that indigenous people acted like they were worshipping St. Ann, but the friars recognized they were really worshipping Toci," said Villaseñor-Black, an associate professor of art history who is writing a book on such examples of synchronism.



UCLA Early Music Ensemble, a student group, will perform with undergraduates from a UCLA classical guitar studio.

The Dec. 2 concert will also highlight cross-cultural connections. UCLA Early Music Ensemble, a student group specializing in pre-18th-century music, will perform 16th-century dance music from Spain in collaboration with undergraduates from the classical guitar studio of Peter Yates, a UCLA music lecturer. Son del Centro, a Santa Ana collective, will perform *son jarocho*-style folk music from the Mexican state of Veracruz. The jarocho music, which is still popular today, bears a striking resemblance to the long-forgotten dance music.

"One of the things that went over on the boats with the Conquistadors was songs, and they shared them with people they were busy conquering," said musicologist Le Guin, who specializes in 16th- and 17th-century Spanish and Spanish colonial music. "Those people took those songs and adapted them according to their culture."

For details on "Contested Visions in the Spanish Colonial World," [click here](#). Admission to the symposium and concert is free. But those planning to go to the concert should [register here](#) by Nov. 28. Click on the calendar of events.
