

# The Indigenous Capilla de Cantuña: The Catholic Temple of The Sun

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## Abstract

The Cantuña chapel within the St. Francis complex in Quito, Ecuador, was one of the first Catholic structures built in this region after the Spanish conquest in the sixteenth century. The chapel holds the name of its presumed native builder, Cantuña. However, a strong connection to the Incan sun deity, Inti, persists on this site. According to common belief and Spanish accounts, the Franciscan monks decided to build their religious complex on top of the palace temple of the Incan ruler, whom the natives believed to be Inti's incarnation.

In this research, I examined vital components of the Capilla de Cantuña, such as the gilded altarpiece. I argue that the chapel acts as an Indigenous monument through the Cara, Inca, and Spanish conquests by preserving an aspect of native culture in a material format that transcends time. Most importantly, because the Cantuña chapel remains the least altered viceregal church in the region, it is a valuable testament to the various conquests and religious conversions of the Kingdom of Quito.

## Introduction

The Spanish conquest brought Catholicism to the New World and took

wealth and discoveries back to Europe.<sup>1</sup> According to the Spanish Franciscans, a mendicant Catholic order which carried out the evangelization of the Indigenous

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<sup>1</sup> Mark A. Burkholder and Lyman L. Johnson, *Colonial Latin America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 37-43.

populations of the continent, the disastrous results of the conquest were necessary for the salvation of Indigenous souls.<sup>2</sup> The Capilla de Cantuña, constructed in 1534, is part of the Convento de San Francisco in Quito, Ecuador.<sup>3</sup> According to scholarship, it seems that the Franciscans strictly used the specific location where the Capilla de Cantuña sits as a site to convert the Indigenous into devoted Catholics. Even though the Spanish Franciscan friars carried out the building campaign, the chapel's name alludes to its presumed Indigenous builder Francisco Cantuña.<sup>4</sup> I argue that the chapel's everlasting Indigenous name has served as a testament and reinforced the Indigenous presence in the chapel to this day.

It is important to note that the Indigenous in this region, both pre-Inca and Inca, did not develop written communication. Their history relied on oral traditions and storytelling.<sup>5</sup> This type of record-keeping is critical to note because the written accounts concerning the natives of the region referred to them as the Incas.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 59-93.

<sup>3</sup> José María Vargas, *Convento De San Francisco De Quito* (Quito: Editorial Santo Domingo, 1967), 4.

<sup>4</sup> Susan Webster-Verdi, "The Devil and the Dolorosa: History and Legend in Quito's Capilla De Cantuña," in *The Americas*, Vol. 67, No. 1 (2010), 1-30.

Scholarship often overlooks the previous ethnic communities since the Inca were the group in charge during the Spanish arrival. I explore the importance of the Capilla de Cantuña from an Indigenous perspective and affirm its function of preserving Indigenous culture and knowledge in a format that transcends the Cara, Inca, and Spanish conquests. Though it initially appears to venerate the Catholic God, I argue that the chapel acts as an enduring Indigenous monument by analyzing the chapel's association with Francisco Cantuña, its location, the materiality of its gilded altarpiece, and the iconography of its ceiling painting.

Early accounts such as Juan de Velasco's, a Jesuit of Spanish descent born in Quito during the seventeenth century, address the region's history.<sup>6</sup> His writings give a detailed history of Ecuador from antiquity to his contemporary time. This narrative, based on oral tradition, is believed to be objective, given the circumstances. Dr. Jose Gabriel Navarro, an Ecuadorian

<sup>5</sup> Susan A. Niles, *The Shape of Inca History: Narrative and Architecture in an Andean Empire* (Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 1999), 4-31.

<sup>6</sup> Eileen Willingham, "Creating the Kingdom of Quito: Patria, History, Language and Utopia in Juan De Velasco's *Historia Del Reino De Quito*" (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1789), 1.

historian, based his analysis of Quito's different art and architecture on Juan de Velasco's writings during the eighteenth century. Dr. Navarro's writings analyze the city's artistic value by the examination of primary sources.<sup>7</sup>

Similarly, Dr. Susan Webster-Verdi bases her research of the Capilla de Cantuña on Dr. Navarro's writings. Dr. Webster-Verdi explores the chapel's architecture with an art historical approach and writes about the Cantuña name's provenance.<sup>8</sup> In my research, I seek to take Dr. Webster-Verdi's work further and analyze the Capilla de Cantuña through an Indigenous lens to understand the underlying meaning for natives in this stylistically Catholic chapel. In her dissertation, Dr. Monica Dominguez-Torres argues that ornamentation served as a cultural negotiation strategy, introducing native elements that acquired new values due to the colonial discourse.<sup>9</sup> My research intends to apply Dr. Dominguez-Torres' model and approach to the Capilla de Cantuña in Quito, Ecuador.

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<sup>7</sup> Jose Gabriel Navarro, *Contribuciones a La Historia Del Arte En El Ecuador. vol. 1* (Quito: Trama, 2007), 13.

<sup>8</sup> Susan Webster-Verdi, "The Devil and the Dolorosa: History and Legend in Quito's Capilla De

## Location

### *The legend of Cantuña and the history of the land*

According to oral tradition, Quito's leading clergymen approached Francisco Cantuña to construct the façade for the Convento de San Francisco during the sixteenth century. After realizing that he would not meet the deadline, Cantuña invoked the Devil's help. The Devil was eager to help in exchange for Cantuña's soul. Cantuña agreed to the deal with the condition that every stone must be in place by sunrise. As dawn approached, the clever Cantuña took out a stone, leaving the structure incomplete. Cantuña, who kept his soul and whose legend continues to live on as part of Ecuador's history and folklore, was praised for finishing the unimaginable task of constructing the Convento de San Francisco's façade overnight. While various versions of the legend exist, they all have the name Cantuña in common. The chapel continues to carry the name of its presumed Indigenous builder. I argue this importance

Cantuña," in *The Americas*, Vol. 67, No. 1 (2010), 1-30.

<sup>9</sup> Monica Dominguez-Torres, "Frames for conversion: The Assimilation of Native Motifs in the Monastic Decoration of New Spain (1540-1580)" (PhD diss., University of Toronto, 2004).

since the conquest's devastation seemed to have eradicated anything related to the Indigenous past, making the chapel an important surviving Indigenous monument directly connected to Indigenous origin stories.

The San Francisco complex has a main entrance to the church and three side entrances to individual chapels that face a plaza (Fig. 1). The plaza, according to primary sources, was an essential marketplace for Indigenous communities.<sup>10</sup> The entrance on the far left belongs to the Capilla de Cantuña. As stated in the research of anthropologist Dr. Frank Salomon, this edifice was built strategically on top of the most important Inca generals' former residences.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, other sources place the building on top of the Inca emperor's palace temple, either Huayna-Capac or his illegitimate heir Atahualpa.<sup>12</sup>



Figure 1: The Convento de San Francisco in Quito, Ecuador.  
Photo: John Coletti, Getty

The original natives of the region were the Quito.<sup>13</sup> The Quito ruled for four hundred years until a powerful group from the coasts of Ecuador, the Cara, invaded their territory and took control around 1000 CE.<sup>14</sup> De Velasco mentions that the Cara and the Quito had a similar language, religion, and customs to the Inca.<sup>15</sup> If this was the case, then both cultures likely revered the sun. The Inca believed that the rulers were direct

<sup>10</sup> Frank Salomon, *Native Lords of Quito in the Age of the Incas: The Political Economy of North-Andean Chiefdoms* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 159.

<sup>11</sup> Frank Salomon, *Native Lords of Quito in the Age of the Incas: The Political Economy of North-Andean Chiefdoms* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 156.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 221.

<sup>13</sup> Juan De Velasco, *Historia Del Reino De Quito En La America Meridional, vol.1* (Quito: El Comercio, 1946), 10.

<sup>14</sup> Jorge Villacrés, *Historia Diplomática De La República Del Ecuador* (Guayaquil: Impresora De La Universidad De Guayaquil, 1967), 5.

<sup>15</sup> Juan De Velasco, *Historia Del Reino De Quito En La America Meridional, vol.1* (Quito: El Comercio, 1946), 267-271.

descendants of the sun deity, Inti.<sup>16</sup> This conquest paved the way for the Inca, who strategically wanted to establish their second capital in Quito.<sup>17</sup> Commanded by Francisco Pizarro,<sup>18</sup> the Spanish arrived on the coast of Ecuador in 1526 and founded the Spanish city of Quito by 1534,<sup>19</sup> the same year the building campaign of the Capilla de Cantuña began.<sup>20</sup>

The Spanish lacked manual labor to erect their buildings.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, as De Velasco mentions, the Spanish used existing native structures as raw materials and indigenous individuals as, presumably, forced laborers.<sup>22</sup> Fray Jodoco Rickje was the

Franciscan friar in charge of erecting the convent, where the Capilla de Cantuña stands.<sup>23</sup> It would seem that the Franciscans were aware that the land had special meaning to the Indigenous, as one of the sites related to their origin stories, and wanted to capitalize on this knowledge and profit from the already established structural framework.<sup>24</sup> The friars decided to begin their evangelization efforts in a simple mud-brick structure.<sup>25</sup> Dr. Webster-Verdi explains that the friars later built the Capilla de Cantuña on top of this structure.<sup>26</sup>

The use of existing edifices with strong connections to native sacred traditions

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<sup>16</sup> Fernando Rosas Moscoso, "The Inca: human and divine relations with gold," in *Inca: Origins and Mysteries of the Golden Civilization*, ed. Paloma Carcedo De Mufarech, and Museo Di Santa Giulia (Venice: Marsilio, 2010), 59.

<sup>17</sup> Jorge Villacrés, *Historia Diplomática De La República Del Ecuador* (Guayaquil: Impresora De La Universidad De Guayaquil, 1967), 8.

<sup>18</sup> Benjamin Keen, *Essays in the Intellectual History of Colonial Latin America* (Colorado: Westview Press, 1998), 39.

<sup>19</sup> Jorge Villacrés, *Historia Diplomática De La República Del Ecuador* (Guayaquil: Impresora De La Universidad De Guayaquil, 1967), 15.

<sup>20</sup> Susan Webster-Verdi, "La Desconocida Historia De La Construcción De La Iglesia De San Francisco," in *Revista Ecuatoriana De Historia*, (2012), 52.

<sup>21</sup> Juan De Velasco, *Historia Del Reino De Quito En La America Meridional, vol.1* (Quito: El Comercio, 1946), 176.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Instituto Nacional de Patrimonio Cultural (INPC) and the Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation (AECID), *San Francisco: una historia para el Futuro* (Quito: INPC/AECID, 2011), 25.

<sup>24</sup> Luciano Andrade Marín, "Geografía E Historia De La Ciudad De Quito," in *Cuadernos Patria Y Cultura*, No. 1 (1966), 7-12.

<sup>25</sup> Jose Gabriel Navarro, *Contribuciones a La Historia Del Arte En El Ecuador. vol. 1* (Quito: Trama, 2007), 57.

<sup>26</sup> Susan Webster-Verdi, *Lettered Artists and the Languages of Empire: Painters and the Profession in Early Colonial Quito* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2017), 11.

as a structural base for Catholic religious buildings seems to have been a Spanish strategy, as seen in the Catedral Metropolitana de la Ciudad de México (Fig. 2). The Spanish used the rocks that made up the Indigenous temple, commonly known as Templo Mayor, and the altar to the god of war, Huitzilopochtli, to build their cathedral.<sup>27</sup> Perhaps this action taken by the Spanish was their method to demonstrate their wishful victory of Catholicism over the natives.



Figure 2: The Catedral Metropolitana de la Ciudad de México built on top of Aztec temple in México City. Photo: Claus Gurumeta.

In the case of the Capilla de Cantuña, it is possible that the Spanish similarly used this Inca structure to showcase the power and triumph of the Spanish and the Catholic

religion. However, considering the Indigenous historical context of the Capilla de Cantuña's site, it could be argued that it remained sacred for the native communities pre and post Cara, Inca, and Spanish conquests. For this reason, the Capilla de Cantuña's physical building seems to serve as a surviving monument safeguarding Indigenous legacy.

Furthermore, a site where the Spanish seem to have also appropriated a specific sacred Inca location is the Korikancha, in Cuzco, Peru (Fig. 3). The Korikancha was a temple considered the Inca world's literal center and dedicated to the sun deity, Inti. Written accounts describe the building covered in metal sheets of gold that reflected the sun. Just like the Catedral Metropolitana de la Ciudad de México and the Capilla de Cantuña in Quito, it seems that the Spanish were aware of the importance of the location of the Korikancha. Therefore, the Spanish appropriated its architecture, stripped all the precious metal, and used it as the structural foundation for their Catholic religious complex.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Jorge Olvera, "La Catedral Metropolitana De México," in *Artes De México*, No. 32 (1960), 12.

<sup>28</sup> Brian S. Bauer, *Ancient Cuzco: Heartland of the Inca* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004), 139-157.



Figure 3: The Convento de Santo Domingo built on top of the Koricancha in Cuzco, Peru. Photo: Unknown

Many academics wrote about the Capilla de Cantuña from an architectural and historical perspective. However, no scholar has identified it as a symbol of continuous Indigenous identity and heritage. The Capilla de Cantuña's location was likely a conversion tool used by the Franciscans and served as a vehicle to connect its participants with their Indigenous past. The site's history would have been knowledge transmitted through oral traditions and known by the descendants of the conquered Indigenous. To this day, the Capilla de Cantuña has retained the name of its presumed builder and continues to stand in the assumed location of the Inca ruler's palace temple. The native connection to the past can also be seen in

later decorative motifs throughout the chapel, especially in its gilded altarpiece and ceiling painting.

### **Gilded Altarpiece**

#### *Gold and its relationship to Inti*

Visually, the heavy use of gold-leaf on the wooden structure follows different trends that make the composition very organic, part of the interior architecture, and the chapel's primary focal point. The altarpiece occupies the entire west wall, becoming part of the architecture, and has a central niche with polychrome statues depicting the crucifixion. Mirrors and decorative motifs made from gold and silver outline the niche (Fig. 4).<sup>29</sup> The frame around the central scene possesses a double set of upside-down Solomonic columns, also known as *estípites*. Scholars attribute the altarpiece to the Indigenous artist Bernardo de Legarda, a product of the Quito School of Art.<sup>30</sup> The Franciscan friar Jodoco Rickje created this workshop to teach the natives the European tradition of

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<sup>29</sup> Jose Gabriel Navarro, *Contribuciones a La Historia Del Arte En El Ecuador. vol. 1* (Quito: Trama, 2007), 115.

<sup>30</sup> Alfonso Ortiz Crespo, "La Iglesia de la Compañía de Jesus de Quito, Cabeza de Serie de la Arquitectura

Barroca en la Antigua Audiencia de Quito," in *Arte de la Real Audiencia de Quito, siglos XVII-XIX: patronos, corporaciones y comunidades* (Quito: Editorial Nerea, 2002), 102.



painting and sculpture.<sup>31</sup> Rickje was also the friar responsible for developing the San Francisco complex, where the Capilla de Cantuña stands.<sup>32</sup> Due to the altarpiece's stylistic composition, the Franciscans likely commissioned Bernardo de Legarda to produce the altarpiece during the chapel's second renovation. Even though the altarpiece's construction seems to date two centuries after the arrival of the Spanish to the Indigenous Kingdom of Quito in 1534, its apparent relationship to native knowledge is present through its materiality. The Indigenous use of gold could seem superficial. However, the Indigenous knowledge of this precious metal goes beyond its physical characteristics. Gold was a vital metal for the Incas, and they, along with other native groups preceding them, cherished it.<sup>33</sup>



Figure 4: The Capilla de Cantuña's main gilded altarpiece. Photo: Courtesy of the San Francisco convent in Quito, Ecuador

Perhaps the artist considered native beliefs for the Capilla de Cantuña's altarpiece's design and manufacture and wanted to refer to gold's religious significance to the Indigenous, pre-Cara, Inca, and Spanish conquest. An oral tradition story describes that a deity guided the Inca and provided them with a gold staff that would sink into the ground where they were supposed to found their empire.<sup>34</sup> According to Inca myths and origin stories, they believed that the conquistadors were children of the sun god, Inti.<sup>35</sup> Dr. Paul Steele suggests that perhaps the association of gold with Inti is in the incorporation of principal

<sup>31</sup> José María Vargas, *Convento De San Francisco De Quito* (Quito: Editorial Santo Domingo, 1967), 3-9.

<sup>32</sup> Instituto Nacional de Patrimonio Cultural (INPC) and the Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation (AECID), *San Francisco: una historia para el Futuro* (Quito: INPC/AECID, 2011), 25.

<sup>33</sup> Fernando Rosas Moscoso, "The Inca: human and divine relations with gold," in *Inca: Origins and*

*Mysteries of the Golden Civilization*, ed. Paloma Carcedo De Mufarech, and Museo Di Santa Giulia (Venice: Marsilio, 2010), 48.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>35</sup> Paul Steele and Catherine J. Allen, *Handbook of Inca mythology* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2011), 18, 246.



centers of gold mining into the emerging empire.<sup>36</sup> His conclusion seems to correlate with the Incas' creation story. Given the altarpiece's gilding and the Indigenous historical context of the Capilla de Cantuña's location, it is likely that the newly converted natives would have seen the altarpiece for more than a solely golden Catholic altar. They would have been able to recognize its materiality as symbols of cultural and spiritual significance.

Additionally, Dr. Clemencia Plazas argues that pre-Inca groups in Ecuador used gold to display their icons, communicate their myths, and decorate themselves. She suggests that the use of metals is part of Indigenous social communication. Dr. Plazas also describes the attribute of shining exclusive to the native gods, specifically the sun.<sup>37</sup>

An example of a pre-Inca and pre-Spanish conquest artifact made out of gold and physically resembling a celestial body is The Sun Mask (Fig. 5). Archeologists found this repoussé item made out of gold sheets on Ecuador's coast. The coast is where the Cara,

the group who presumably preceded the Inca in conquering the Quitus, is said to have originated.<sup>38</sup> This information is essential to note since the Capilla de Cantuña is said to stand in the land of the Quitus. The golden diadem portrays the sun with a two-dimensional approach. It has a central square shape with face-like features and emanating zig-zag shapes meant to mimic the sun's rays.



Figure 5: Ecuador's Sun Mask found in the coastal region. Photo: Unknown

In the case of the Capilla de Cantuña, on top of the altarpiece, a depiction of a man surrounded by what seems to be a golden mandorla or full-body halo is present (Fig. 6). The iconography and materiality of this figure, meant to symbolize the image of the

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., 247.

<sup>37</sup>Clemencia Plazas "Gold and the Senses. Prehispanic Metallurgy of Ecuador," in *Ecuador: The Secret Art of Precolumbian Ecuador*, (Milan: 5 Continents Editions, 2007), 221-222.

<sup>38</sup>N. Meeks, S. La Niece, and P. Estévez, "The Technology of Early Platinum Plating: A Gold Mask of the La Tolita Culture, Ecuador," in *Archaeometry* 44, No.2 (2002), 274.

Catholic “God the Father,” instead would have been understood by Indigenous viewers to represent the sun deity, Inti. Additionally, sun-ray-like shapes outline the top portion of the altarpiece, which in association with the ceiling painting above, gives the gold altarpiece the resemblance of the sun in the sky (Fig. 7).

Furthermore, Dr. Fernando Rosas Moscoso clarifies that gold held significant value and symbolized wealth and power to the Indigenous due to its scarcity and features. He argues that the metal had a significant role in the Incas' material culture and was part of the collective mentalities of pre-Spanish communities.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, according to primary sources, Huayna-Capac transported more than five hundred loads of gold to Quito.<sup>40</sup> Perhaps the ruler stored this vast treasure in his palace temple, where presumably the Capilla de Cantuña stands.



Figure 6: God the Father embodied by emanating sun rays on the upper part of the altarpiece. Courtesy of the San Francisco convent in Quito, Ecuador



Figure 7: The Capilla de Cantuña's altarpiece emulating the sun. Photo: Courtesy of the Convento de San Francisco in Quito, Ecuador

An earlier example, reinforcing the Spanish practice of using Indigenous beliefs in materiality as a conversion tool, is in the Iglesia de la Concepción in Coyoacán, México (Fig. 8). The Franciscans built this church in 1525 on top of a religious site for the natives who also glorified gold.<sup>41</sup> Visually

<sup>39</sup>Fernando Rosas Moscoso, “The Inca: human and divine relations with gold,” in *Inca: Origins and Mysteries of the Golden Civilization*, ed. Paloma Carcedo De Mufarech, and Museo Di Santa Giulia (Venice: Marsilio, 2010), 48.

<sup>40</sup>Pedro De Cieza De León, *Crónica Del Perú*, ed. Franklin Pease (Lima, Perú: Pontificia Universidad Católica Del Perú, 1986), 231.

<sup>41</sup>Maria De La Luz Moreno Cabrera, Alejandro Meraz Moreno, and Juan Cervantes Rosado,

the altarpiece in the Iglesia de la Concepción follows the sixteenth-century European tradition of painted panels mounted on gilded frameworks. Like the Capilla de Cantuña's altarpiece, they both use gold, and they are both constructed on top of significant Indigenous religious landmarks. It would appear that the Franciscans used Indigenous material knowledge to transmit a message of power and superiority over the Indigenous and their beliefs.

It also seems that the Capilla de Cantuña's altarpiece alludes to the sun's presence in the sky, illuminating the chapel's interior. The use of gold would have correlated with the Indigenous viewer's heritage, creating a different meaning associated with the sun's divinity. While the Indigenous use of gold could be generally perceived and compared to a modern-day affinity to its materiality, the Indigenous knowledge and of this precious metal goes beyond its physical characteristics, as previously explained. Therefore an analysis of the importance of the gilded altarpiece through an Indigenous perspective changes its meaning within this stylistic Catholic temple by showing how its builder drew upon Indigenous communities' visual and spiritual

culture. Bernardo de Legarda's creation of a celestial wall painting in the chapel's apse could be evidence of further efforts by himself and the Franciscans to strengthen the gilded altarpiece's contextualization.



Figure 8: The altarpiece in the church of the Iglesia de la Concepción in Coyoacán, México. Photo: Enrique López-Tamayo Biosca

## Ceiling Painting

### *Iconography and identity*

According to Dr. Susan Webster-Verdi, the Capilla de Cantuña's first renovation corresponds to the seventeenth

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"Relleno Aligerado Con Vasijas Cerámicas En El Templo De La Inmaculada Concepción, En

Coyoacán." in *Boletín De Monumentos Históricos*, No. 35 (2015), 122.

century when the Cantuña name took hold.<sup>42</sup> The second renovation took place in the eighteenth century when the current ceiling replaced the original, damaged by earthquakes.<sup>43</sup> The painting depicting the sky is in the apse, above the main altarpiece, extending throughout the chapel's crossing (Fig. 9). The predominant color is an unsaturated blue contrasted with gray and white clouds emanating from behind the altarpiece. In the crossing, light penetrates the chapel's interior through a small oculus in the center of the vaulted ceiling and also through two clerestories on the North and South walls. Perhaps the native artist Bernardo de Legarda wanted to depict a beautiful celestial backdrop to his gilded altarpiece portraying the sun, creating an homage for the viewers' Indigenous identity and past. This action would also have emphasized the chapel's importance and function as a monument preserving Indigenous cultural knowledge.

The Quito creation stories began with astronomical events. They talk about a meteorite or comet impact that established the location of their settlement.<sup>44</sup> It could be that the worship of deities associated with celestial bodies was common among the pre-Inca groups in Quito. Therefore, an easy transition would have taken place when the Inca took over the land. The tradition of wall painting in the Andes has been traced back to 1400 BCE, predating the Inca.<sup>45</sup> Scientific evidence proves the presence of pigments in various pre-Inca and Inca temples.<sup>46</sup> Therefore, a ceiling painting depicting the sky inside the Capilla de Cantuña would not have been unfamiliar for the Indigenous.

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<sup>42</sup>Susan Webster-Verdi, "The Devil and the Dolorosa: History and Legend in Quito's Capilla De Cantuña," in *The Americas*, Vol. 67, No. 1 (2010), 24.

<sup>43</sup>Alfonso Ortiz Crespo, "La Iglesia de la Compañía de Jesus de Quito, Cabeza de Serie de la Arquitectura Barroca en la Antigua Audiencia de Quito," in *Arte de la Real Audiencia de Quito, siglos XVII-XIX*:

*patronos, corporaciones y comunidades*, (Quito: Editorial Nerea, 2002), 102.

<sup>44</sup>Luciano Andrade Marín, "Geografía E Historia De La Ciudad De Quito," in *Cuadernos Patria Y Cultura*, No. 1 (1966), 1-12.

<sup>45</sup>Duccio Bonavia, *Mural painting in ancient Peru* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985).

<sup>46</sup>*Ibid.*, 72.





Figure 9: The Capilla de Cantuña's main gilded altarpiece below the ceiling painting depicting the sky. Photo: Unknown

Just as cosmology held an important place in Inca culture and practice, so did astronomy. The Inca paid close attention to the movements of celestial bodies. In his study, Dr. Brian Bauer argues for the connection between Inca cosmology from a religious perspective intertwined with their governing politics.<sup>47</sup> Notably, he mentions that the sun was an imperial expression of religion that the Spanish authorities tried to

suppress.<sup>48</sup> Instead, as previously explained, it is likely that the Franciscans were aware of this information and instead capitalized it and used it for their evangelization efforts. This idea of religious and political suppression can be applied to the Capilla de Cantuña since it presumably sits on top of the Inca ruler's palace temple, whom the natives believed to be a direct descendant from the sun god.<sup>49</sup>

Stylistically, the Capilla de Cantuña follows European Franciscan celestial painting traditions. Possibly, the friars wanted to portray Franciscan iconography that coincided with the native cosmological and astronomical beliefs. St. Francis of Assisi, the Franciscan order's founder, constantly referred to celestial bodies in his teachings.<sup>50</sup> The depiction of celestial bodies as ornamentation is evident in the ceiling painting of the Capilla de Cantuña, as it is in the ceilings of the Basilica of San Francesco d'Assisi in Assisi, Italy. (Fig. 10,11). The Indigenous historical context of the Capilla de Cantuña might suggest the transmutation

<sup>47</sup>Brian S. Bauer and David S. P. Dearborn, *Astronomy and Empire in the Ancient Andes: The Cultural Origins of Inca Sky Watching* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), 1.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid., 156.

<sup>49</sup>Fernando Rosas Moscoso, "The Inca: human and divine relations with gold," in *Inca: Origins and*

*Mysteries of the Golden Civilization*, ed. Paloma Carcedo De Mufarech, and Museo Di Santa Giulia (Venice: Marsilio, 2010), 59.

<sup>50</sup>Roger D. Sorrell, *San Francisco of Assisi and Nature: Tradition and Innovation in Western Christian Attitudes toward the Environment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 56.

of these decorative motifs in the Indigenous participants' eyes.

Another instance where Indigenous knowledge is present in a Catholic setting is in the painting of *The Virgin of the Mountain*, created in 1720 (Fig. 12). This oil on canvas artwork by an unknown artist in the Museo Nacional de Arte in La Paz, Bolivia, was created depicts a religious scene. The artist divided the vertical painting into three registers. The upper portion depicts a Catholic divine scene. A mountainous landscape in the middle register occupies the middle ground of the composition. Here, the viewer can discern a depiction of a large mountain with small vignettes throughout its surface illustrating mining activities with European and Indigenous individuals. A portrayal of the Virgin Mary seems to emanate from the mountain. According to Catholic doctrine, Mary is the mother of Jesus, who was the son of God. The mountain takes up the majority of space in the painting and becomes the focal point, emphasizing its importance through hierarchy of scale. In the bottom register, a portrayal of devoted kneeling subjects, presumably the patrons of the painting, could be seen on each side of a cartouche. In this painting, the artists used implied lines to guide the viewers' eyes from the bottom of

the painting to the top through the mountain's shape. The artist's thoughtful use of space and symmetry makes the composition balanced. An earth-tone palette contrasts the saturated colors in the individuals' clothing, specifically the rich reds and vibrant blues. There is a conflicting sense of light and shadows in the composition, and the primary light source seems not to be present. The artist's deliberate choice to represent the Virgin embodied as a mountain seems to be either an attempt to assimilate Catholic doctrine or an attempt to mask and safeguard Indigenous knowledge in a Catholic setting.

Teresa Gisbert argues that the images of the Virgin instituted by Catholic authorities served to end the natives' idolatry in the Inca empire and that the image of the Virgin was a culturally unifying symbol. Gisbert references the Spanish chronicler Ramos Gavilan, who explains that "Mary is the mountain where the stone of the Christian [Catholic] church came out, Christ." The natives worshipped the mountains, not only due to their creation myths but also because they mined gold, the material related to the sun's divinity. As Gisbert argues, the practice of assimilating symbols worshipped by the natives spread to surrounding towns to fight the native

resistance and ease the conquest efforts.<sup>51</sup> Like the painting in the Capilla de Cantuña, it may seem that the Franciscans desired to use familiar Indigenous iconography as a conversion tool. However, an Indigenous artist's presumed commission of this ornamental oeuvre might have resulted in introducing the artist's ulterior motive to showcase his Indigenous heritage and safeguard indigenous knowledge for posterity.



Figure 10: The nave in the lower chapel of the Basilica of San Francesco d'Assisi in Assisi in Assisi, Italy. Photo: Unknown



Figure 11: The nave in the upper of the Basilica of San Francesco d'Assisi in Assisi in Assisi, Italy. Photo: Unknown



Figure 12: The Virgin of the Mountain in Bolivia. Photo: Unknown

Furthermore, the celestial ceiling painting in the Capilla de Cantuña seems to continue the Franciscan spiritual tradition seen in the early church of San Martín Huaquechula in Puebla, México. As Dr. Savannah Esquivel explained, St. Francis' stigmata emerged during the process of deep meditation and penance. Therefore, the Franciscans' desired to engage the sensory faculties of the viewer with wall paintings found within. Dr. Esquivel describes that this kind of atmosphere transported the viewer to a divine setting and contributed to the Indigenous' spiritual transformation. In San

<sup>51</sup>Teresa Gisbert, "El Cerro De Potosí y el Dios Pachacámac/The Cerro De Potosí and the

Pachacámac God," in *Chungara: Revista De Antropología Chilena* 42, No. 1 (2010), 169-180.



Martín Huaquechula, the Indigenous artists commissioned to decorate the church introduced native iconography on the friezes' decorative ornamentation (Fig. 13).<sup>52</sup> The desire of Indigenous artists to retain a presence within a Catholic space is present in San Martín Huaquechula. Perhaps they wanted to communicate the continuous effort to safeguard Indigenous culture and identity within a Catholic space to other viewers.



Figure 13: Decorative grotesques in wall paintings of San Martín Huaquechula in Puebla, México. Photo: Richard Perry

The Capilla de Cantuña reference to its participants' Indigenous past is evident when closely looking at its components. The chapel's association with the sun through its physical location, the gilded altarpiece's materiality, and appearance would have supported the celestial ceiling painting's

iconography. Nevertheless, the painting would have engaged the native participants by creating an ethereal setting. Without a doubt, these seemingly European religious elements would have facilitated the natives' conversion into Catholicism by creating a familiar space for Indigenous viewers. At the same time, an Indigenous viewer could have recognized these elements as symbols of their Indigenous culture and identity and instead seen this Catholic structure as a reliquary safeguarding their knowledge hidden in plain sight for generations to come.

## Conclusion

The Capilla de Cantuña's importance to the Indigenous through its name, location, gilded altarpiece, and ceiling painting is evident. The legend surrounding the Convento de San Francisco and its presumed builder, Francisco Cantuña, reinforced and ensured the safekeeping of native culture and knowledge in a material format that transcends time. Two centuries later, the Indigenous artist Bernardo de Legarda embedded his heritage into the chapel's decorative campaigns.

<sup>52</sup>Savannah Esquivel, "These Things Do Not Exist": Painting Grotesques in Sixteenth Century New Spain" (presentation, Annual College Art

Association Conference, Los Angeles, CA, February 21-24, 2018).

Today, Ecuador continues to be a predominately Catholic country, and its native population continues to have strong ties to its past. Quito is one of the most well-preserved viceregal capitals in the world, and for this reason, it was one of the first World Heritage sites declared by UNESCO in 1978.<sup>53</sup> While the Capilla de Cantuña alludes to Quito's native past, Ecuador bases its national pride on its history and architectural legacy. This idea of nationalism was taken further in constructing the Basílica del Voto Nacional in 1884 (Fig. 14).<sup>54</sup> The style of the church follows the European neo-gothic trend of the nineteenth century. However, the artist behind its design decided to use autochthonous animals such as tortoises, llamas, and condors instead of traditional European gargoyles (Fig. 15). The artist's choice to display discernible decorative motifs that any Ecuadorian resident would recognize exhibits the legacy of structures like the Capilla de Cantuña that instead concealed knowledge in stylistically European motifs to preserve their Indigenous culture and knowledge.



Figure 14: *The Basílica del Voto Nacional in Quito, Ecuador.*  
 Photo: Unknown



Figure 15: *Detail of gargoyles representing llamas outside the Basílica del Voto Nacional in Quito, Ecuador.* Photo: Unknown

Furthermore, since the European conquest to this day, the Spanish division of society into hereditary and socioeconomic classes was a problem for the Indigenous population. Many Ecuadorians do not realize that most of the country's modern culture takes away from its native past. To this day, Ecuador's citizens and the world continue to neglect and ignore untold native histories,

<sup>53</sup>ICOMOS-International Council On Monuments and Sites ( Paris, 1978), 1-3,  
<https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/2/documents>.

<sup>54</sup>George Lauderbaugh, *The History of Ecuador* (Westport: ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2012), 12.

like the Capilla de Cantuña's. This study intends to bring attention to the overlooked history of one of the country's most famous sites by analyzing the chapel's Indigenous historical context and its Indigenous cultural legacy. This study also aims to bring pride to Ecuador's Indigenous heritage and serve as a foundation for future scholarship.

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