Figure 1. Mask, Mixtec, Mexico, fourteenth–sixteenth century. Turquoise, shell, coral, mother-of-pearl, jadeite, and stone mosaic on wood, 25 x 15 cm. Museo Pigorini, Rome. Photo: © S-MNPE-L. Pigorini, Roma-EUR—su concessione del Ministero dei beni e delle attività culturali e del turismo.


Figure 3. Jar with dragon among lotus design, Chinese, 1567–1572. Porcelain with underglaze blue, H. 5⅜ in. Indianapolis Museum of Art (60.96). Photo: Courtesy of the Indianapolis Museum of Art through the Images for Academic Publishing (IAP) initiative.

Figure 4. Trousseau box, Japanese, mid–late seventeenth century. Black lacquer on wood with decoration in gold and colored Kodaiji maki-e, nashiji, gilt metal ring-fittings, pewter rims, 11¼ x 12¼ x 14¼ in. Yale University Art Gallery (2001.80.1). Photo: Courtesy of the Yale University Art Gallery through the Images for Academic Publishing (IAP) initiative.
New positions on art and freedom in the context of Iberian expansion, 1500–1600

ALESSANDRA RUSSO

Techné as intellectual experience

Mosaic masks and painted manuscripts from Mexico; golden beakers (aquillas), cameld wool tapestries, and metalwork from Peru; feather capes from Brazil; painted porcelains from China; carved ivories from Sierra Leone and Goa; lacquer caskets from Japan: All of these radically different types of artifacts (figs. 1–4 and 7–8) and their intriguing technés were observed between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries, in the context of the expansion of the two Iberian crowns—the Spanish and the Portuguese. Encountered in situ, they were also frequently assembled together in European private collections and public museums, where they were often displayed in a fascinating dialogue with classical antiquity.1 But along with their physical appearance, these diverse artifacts also made a simultaneous textual appearance, as conquistadors, missionaries, administrators, chroniclers, naturalists, collectors, and artists devoted extensive portions of their letters, accounts, dictionaries, inventories, and treatises to the novelty and impact of these objects in the contemporary panorama.

Approaching this substantial corpus of sources as a broad, early modern Iberian archive on the arts encourages reading the historical documentation of pre-Columbian artifacts in conjunction with myriad other texts written on objects and monuments created in Asia, Africa, and Europe itself.2 The rationale for doing so is neither mere comprehensiveness, nor ahistorical comparativism. Reading texts on American technés and sources describing objects observed in or coming from other territories impacted by the Iberian expansion allows us to unearth the meaningful and vigorous debates triggered precisely by the novelty of all these objects. These debates embraced critical topics, including the relationship between technical skills and ingenium (ingenuity, inventiveness, wit, or talent);3 the difference between inventiveness and ability; the definition of humanity and freedom via artistic practice; and, more broadly, the redefinition of the nature and function of artistic activity tout court.4

In this sense, the Iberian archive and the objects described in it—particularly the American objects, both pre- and postconquest—actively participated in the discussion on the moving frontiers between the mechanical and liberal arts that was taking place in Europe during the same period. We know how,
especially in Renaissance Italy, artists and theorists were arguing that architecture, painting, and sculpture—previously considered mechanical or “servile” arts—should also be counted among the liberal arts (such as rhetoric, arithmetic, and music). The liberal arts were understood as originating from intellectual activity that was free from any servitude to the supposed vileness of matter, and indispensable to the experience of free individuals. The arguments for this redefinition of architecture, sculpture, and painting as liberal arts can be traced in sixteenth-century sources: They include the intimate relationship of these creative activities with mathematics and geometry, as well as the capability of painting to portray nature, to create allegory, to narrate, and so on. But according to Robert Williams, the real shift in this new conception of artistic activity was the identification of art’s potential to have a deep relationship with, and something important to say about, “the entire realm of human experience.” It is at this moment that art “ceases to be a well defined technique or set of techniques, a techne, and becomes instead a master technique, a metatechne” that has less to do with specific knowledge than with abstract thinking.5

As the present essay will show, accounts of pre-Columbian artifacts and, more broadly, artifacts encountered in the context of Iberian expansion (in the Americas, but also in Asia, Africa, and parts of Europe itself), played an active role in this decisive epistemological transformation. Counterintuitively, it was the description of a panoply of new making practices—those in principle related to the “mechanical” aspects of art—that provided a decisive argument for identifying art as a distillation of humanity, intellectual freedom, and liberal activity. Finally, by dialoguing with Williams’s vocabulary, I will show how these sources redefined the concept of techné as metatechné, due precisely to the artists’ ability to invent infinite intelligent possibilities for the transformation of matter.

**A simultaneously new artistic world**

At the end of the sixteenth century, the Portuguese historian Diogo do Couto narrated the discovery of the ancient city of Angkor in the Kingdom of Cambodia, which he dates around 1550: “a very fine city discovered in its forests” (uma fermosissima cidade que se achou em seus matos) with its gateways, bridges, and palaces “truly royal in their numerous cornices, the leaf decoration, the figures and other ornamentation which delight the eye and bear witness to the skill of their sculptors.”6 The author stresses that this event occurred during the mandate of the Portuguese viceroy Alfonso de Noronha, thereby dating the discovery of a formerly unknown ancient city in the context of the Iberian political presence in the region. Thirty years before the discovery of Angkor, on the other side of the globe, the conquistador Hernán Cortés described Tenochtitlan with a similar tone. The contradictions at the heart of the colonial enterprise are epitomized by the fact that Cortés’s narrative of the final attack on the city begins with a commentary on its beauty: “There are, in all districts of this great city, many temples or houses for their idols. They are all very beautiful buildings [. . .]. Amongst these temples there is one, the principal one, whose great size and magnificence no human tongue could describe . . . .”

A gigantic corpus of sources addresses a wide range of artistic practices encountered in the context of Iberian expansion, from the work of Cambodian builders and artists to that of the Mexica: We find descriptions of sculpture, architecture, painting (on a variety of surfaces), weaving, metalwork, and more. For instance, the Codex Magliabechiano—a pictographic and alphabetic manuscript made in New Spain in the mid-sixteenth century—devotes a dozen pages to the intricate patterns of woven tunics associated with Mexica sacred ceremonies (fig. 5). Short descriptions in Spanish, seemingly translating Nahuatl agglutinative terms, accompany each representation. We learn that the Mexica had imaginative names for these tunics, such as manta de nariz muerta (tunic of dead nose), manta de xícara tuerta (tunic of twisted mug), manta de cosa negra (tunic of black thing), and manta de humo o cuero (tunic of smoke or leather). In a document dedicated to the supposed superstitions and idolatries of the local population, we therefore find a brief pictorial treatise on the variety of pre-Columbian textiles still visible a few decades after the conquest. The text states that these

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are images of “the tunics or dresses which the Indians used in the festivals” (mantas o vestidos que los indios usavan en las fiestas). The past tense used by the scribe (usavan), in combination with the vividness of their visual representation in the codex, makes us wonder whether these tunics had been physically collected by missionaries to be studied.

Some decades after the Codex Magliabechiano, the less well-known Boxer Codex described the painted bodies of the Bisayas, inhabitants of the Philippines (a territory that by then was also under the Spanish jurisdiction of the Kingdom of New Spain): “The Bisayas are accustomed to painting their bodies with very delicate paintings; they make them with heated iron, and they have skillful masters who know how to make them well. They perform this work with such precision and with such perfection [tan al compas] that they evoke admiration in whoever sees them. They resemble illuminations [i.e., paintings in manuscripts].” The superb drawing accompanying the description aims to illustrate the sophistication and precision of the tattoos—note how the artist has duplicated the figure, portraying him from both the front and the back, to demonstrate the intricacy of the designs over the entire surface of the flesh (fig. 6).

Around the same time that the author of the Boxer Codex was praising the body “illuminations” of the Bisayas, the Italian naturalist Ulisse Aldrovandi (1522–1605) was writing about the Mixtec turquoise mask kept today at the Museo Pigorini in Rome (fig. 1). He

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9. “Acostumbran los Bisayas a pintarse los cuerpos con unas pinturas muy galanas hazenlas con hierros de azofar puestos al fuego y tienen oficiales muy pulidos que los saben bien hacer. Hazenlas con tanta horden y concierto y tan al compas que causan admiracion a quien las be. Son a manera de luminaciones.” *Boxer Codex,* ca. 1590, Lilly Library, Indiana University, Ms. Boxer II, fol. 27. Digitized images of the manuscript can be found at http://webapp1.dlib.indiana.edu /metsnav/common/navigate.do?oid=VAB8326.
suggestively compared its mosaic technique with that of the Lithostrotos, the pavement where Christ was reputedly condemned by Pilate. A few decades later, the Mexican Carmelite friar Andrés de San Miguel (1577–1644) described Andean aquillas (fig. 2), the golden beakers that he had probably read about in Garcilaso de la Vega’s Comentarios Reales de los Incas (1609 and 1617). Like Garcilaso, the friar compares them with the objects supposedly used in Solomon’s Temple, insisting that they surpassed their antique predecessors in quantity and in beauty: “The likes of these ceremonial golden beakers have never been seen anywhere in the world, not even in the Temple of Solomon . . . .”

On the other side of the world, the Portuguese Jesuit João Rodrigues (1558–1634), a contemporary of Andrés de San Miguel and Garcilaso de la Vega, praised the vertiginous scale of Japanese statuary, and in particular the perfect proportions of the gigantic Buddha he had visited in Kamakura: “They are very skillful in the art of statuary and their statues, such as those of idols, both of wood or cast from metal, whether big or small, are well proportioned. They have such large statues in their temples that a man standing on the shoulder of one of them cannot touch its ear with his hand.” To the Jesuit eye, proportion was a demonstration of the capacity of Japanese artists to think mathematically, indirectly elevating sculpture to the rank of the liberal arts.

One could add any number of quotations from this panoply of texts, whose richness and variety would hardly bore any reader. But we must move on to ask a few questions.

Ingenium everywhere

How can we account for this rich array of texts, all devoted to artistic practices in the most distant corners of the Iberian world? Can we understand them as evidence of a proto-ethnographic sensibility among missionaries and chroniclers in their encounters with the “Other”? Not being very fond of the rhetoric of the Other, I would rather like to ask a completely different set of questions: What were the precise political implications of praising these technés? What role did the textual celebration of artistic intelligence play within the project of Iberian expansion? And to what extent was it also independent from it?

The complex relationship between artistic objects, their descriptions, and the political expansion of the Iberian crowns needs to be recalled here. One common thread in the sources quoted above is the insistence on local artists’ aptitude with proportion, ornamentation, and scale. Moreover, the beauty of the objects is said to be the result of skills that are only partially understandable to the authors of these texts. The different stages of the “making” process often remained mysterious to early modern observers. In some cases, the artifacts came from societies removed in time, such as the Mixtec mask acquired and described by Ulisse Aldrovandi and the gigantic Buddha praised by João Rodrigues. In other cases, such as the beautiful objects from Hispaniola described by the Dominican Bartolomé de Las Casas, the society that produced them had completely disappeared. But in other passages by Las Casas himself, and in the pages of the Florentine Codex (which I shall turn to later in this text), artists were portrayed as active, and their skills could be recorded almost step by step.

Another common thread among the texts is that they describe objects and monuments as having been created with a near total lack of tools, or with very simple instruments. This techné “without tools” makes the imaginative skills of these populations all the more impressive. Garcilaso de la Vega dedicates an entire chapter to this question, listing all the different media he has encountered: textiles, metalwork, sculpture, architecture, woodwork, and so on. The author stresses that the splendid results were obtained con toda su simplicidad (with all their simplicity). The insistence on

10. This comparison appears in the posthumous edition of Aldrovandi’s Museum Metallicum, prepared and published by Bartolomeo Ambrosini in 1648, with an engraving depicting the mask. John 19:13 describes Pilate judging Christ “in the place that is called Lithostrotos, and in Hebrew Gabbatha.” See Russo (see note 1).


the modesty (or even absence) of tools used to obtain such superb results has an immense significance in the context of Iberian expansion. The ostensible asymmetry these authors observed between the artists’ resources and their creations must be interpreted in light of the political implications of their celebration of the various technēs they encountered—particularly in parts of the world where the Spanish and Portuguese crowns were establishing themselves, or, as in the case of João Rodrigues's Japan, where the process of Christianization was deployed without colonization.

In fact, missionaries cited the artistic inventiveness and skillfulness of local populations as evidence of their rationality, and therefore their ability to be converted. We must remember that the question of the humanity and rationality of the different societies encountered throughout the world was, at least in the first half of the sixteenth century, a contentious and legal topic. The premises of colonization and Christianization hinged on whether these populations were or were not rational, and whether they were or were not slaves by nature. If irrational, they could be enslaved and conquered but not Christianized, because they would be incapable of understanding and voluntarily accepting the Word of God. If they were rational and human, they could be Christianized but not colonized, or at least not with the methods employed in the first three decades after the conquest. As is well known, this was one of the most complex debates of the era, pitting missionaries against conquistadors. One of its most prominent actors was Bartolomé de Las Casas.14 But what specific role did art serve within this context?

One of the arguments used to prove the rationality and hence the humanity of the inhabitants of the New World was precisely their ability in what missionaries still called, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, “mechanical arts.” A letter of 1537 written by Julián Garcés, Dominican friar and Bishop of Tlaxcala, assured Pope Paul III that the capacity of the Indians to receive the faith could be demonstrated by their artistic mastery: “Who would be so presumptuous and brazen to affirm that they are incapable of faith if we see how capable they are in the mechanical arts?”15 Following this correspondence, the same year the pope issued the bull Sublimus Dei, in which he asserted: “the Indians are truly men . . . they are not only capable of understanding the Catholic Faith but, according to our information, they desire exceedingly to receive it.”16 Contrary to the traditional distinction between the liberal arts (as defined by free intellectual activity) and the work of craftsmen, missionaries posited the mechanical arts as the best demonstration of the American population’s “free will” to receive Christianity. One object that might have played a crucial role in this important epistemological shift is the wonderful feather mosaic today in the Musée des Jacobins in Auch (France) representing the Mass of Saint Gregory. In the inscription that frames the piece, the name of Pope Paul III appears; it has been suggested that the feather mosaic was a gift to thank him for his statement, and to demonstrate that he was correct in his assertion that artistic skill proved the American population’s rationality and hence ability to be “freely” Christianized.17

Artistic intelligence therefore played a critical role in the debate on the rationality of the populations of the New World, as well as those of Asia and Africa. It would nonetheless be incorrect to say that the only purpose of celebrating creativity was to argue for the “capability” of the populations being conquered. Artistic skill served, in

and many other authors do not seem aware of the sophisticated artistic techniques since discovered by archeologists, such as the miniature quartz drills used by the Inca to transform the Spondylus into beads; see J. D. Moore, D. Hills, and C. Vilchez, “Technē and the Thorny Oyster: Spondylus Craft Production and the Inca Empire at Taller Conchales, Cabeza de Vaca, Tumbes, Peru,” paper presented at the conference “Making Value, Making Meaning: Technē in the Pre-Columbian World,” Dumbarton Oaks, Washington, D.C., October 2013; proceedings forthcoming.


15. “¿Quién es el de tan atrevido corazón y respecto tan ajenos de vergüenza, que ose afirmar que son incapaces de la fe los que vemos ser capazísimos de las artes mecánicas . . . ?” G. García, Documentos inéditos ó muy raros para la historia de México (Mexico City, 1907), doc. CXII, p. 242. Garcés stressed that the people in Mexico “Tienen los ingenios sobramenar fácilmente para que se les enseñe cualquiera cosa. Si les mandan contar, ó leer, ó escribir, pintar, obrar en cualquiera arte mecánica ó liberal, muestran luego grande claridad, presteza y facilidad de engrés para aprender todos los principios, lo cual nace, así del buen templo de la tierra y piadosas influencias del Cielo, como de su templada y simple comida, como muchas veces se me ha ofrecido considerando estas cosas.” Ibid., p. 239.


fact, not only as a proof of their *intellectual* capacity but also, by extension, of the “liberality” of artistic activity itself. It’s worth exploring this implication further.

**A new humanity**

The author who most imaginatively and thoroughly discusses the *artists* of the Americas is Bartolomé de Las Casas, in his *Apologética historia sumaria*, which he wrote in Madrid around 1555 to 1559 using material that he had gathered throughout his life. In this magnum opus, Las Casas discusses artifacts from Hispaniola, New Spain, Yucatán, Peru, and from what is today Nicaragua, Colombia, Venezuela, and Guatemala. An excerpt on the architects of Peru exemplifies how the Dominican aimed at a much broader argument: “They are great intellectual experts in geometry, which we call architects, who draw up the plan, organize the work accordingly, and then order what has to be done, and manual workers, who are the ones who get down to work.”

Here, interestingly, Las Casas draws a clear line between the “intellectual experts in geometry” responsible for the design of Andean architecture and those who partook in the manual labor. Nonetheless, the splendid final results, according to the Dominican, required the combined effort of both groups. Las Casas’s use of the present tense suggests that he was referring also to the great quality of the architecture built after the arrival of the Spaniards.

In another passage, Las Casas praises Andean textile production (fig. 7), again employing the present tense, assuring his readers that the weavers continue their prolific work every day (“muchas obras déstas hacen cada día”). In a passage describing Andean metalwork, the Dominican insists on the contemporary vitality of the artistic panorama: “The other trade is that of the silversmiths. In the past there was an infinity of them, and still today there are many whose inventiveness, industry, and subtlety can hardly be sufficiently praised. In fact, it may be impossible to overstate it.”

Las Casas also frequently points out the artists’ almost total lack of tools (*falta de instrumentos*). He writes that the objects are made “without anything to help with” (*sin otra cosa ninguna de que se ayuden*), further emphasizing the pure intelligence of the act of making. The Dominican is astonished at how Andean metalworkers create such complex objects without the use of soldering: “combining silver with gold, and gold and silver with ceramic, without soldering [the materials], there is none of our workers who can compete, and who does not get scared to see how such different materials can be joined”

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18. For an innovative study of Las Casas’s reflections on preconquest artistic skill—as separate from unorthodox religious practices (idolatry) and “produced without the constraint of necessity, but rather out of ‘recreation and curiosity’”—see D. H. Colmenares, “De-Idolizing Artifacts in the *Apologética Historia Sumaria* by Bartolomé de Las Casas” (unpublished manuscript, 2012), esp. p. 11. Colmenares also proposes that Las Casas ordered the American oficiales territorially, “in a progressive perfection” (p. 24), from the simplicity of Hispaniola artifacts to the superior qualities of those from New Spain (including postconquest objects). He criticized the methods of the Spanish conquest in the Caribbean and argued for the superiority of society in New Spain.

19. “Ser grandes geómetras intelectuales que llamamos arquitectos, que trazan la obra y ordenan, y mandan lo que se ha de hacer, y manuales, que son los que en la obra ponen las manos.” B. de Las Casas, *Apologética historia sumaria* [1555–1559], ed. E. O’Gorman (Mexico City, 1967), vol. 1, p. 339.

20. Ibid., p. 340: “Las ropas de algodón y de lana que hacían y hoy hacen [son] muy polidas, muy pintadas de diversas y finísimas colores (estas colores hacen de ciertas yerbas). Muchas mantas de que hacen sus vestidos se han visto de muy fina lana y de diversidad de colores, blanco, negro, verde, azul, amarillo, bien matizadas y proporcionadas y tan ricas que parecen almazaires moriscos [. . .] [Los países de tapicería que hacen es] tan bien hecha y hermosa . . . que pudieran ponerse y adornar con ellos los palacios del rey. Muchas obras déstas hacen cada día, de lana y algodón, muy primas y muy delgadas y finas.”


22. Colmenares (see note 18), p. 16.
Here, Las Casas seems to refer to the reception of metalwork from Peru on the Iberian peninsula: Spanish artists were intimidated, and perhaps somewhat jealous, upon seeing the results of new techniques from the other side of the world.

The extreme complexity of the artists' techniques, in combination with the lack (or simplicity) of tools at their disposal, thus served as evidence of their intelligence, wit, and inventiveness. Beyond the richness of these anecdotes, and the relationship between (artistic) rationality and Christianization mentioned above, another, more crucial implication clearly emerges from the sources. In the writings of Las Casas, a new concept of humanity takes shape—a humanity which does not lie in a biological essence, but in the ability to think, craft, and imagine. It is an inner essence of humanity, which can be demonstrated, for instance, by Las Casas's insistence that many of these artists are so young that they have barely learned to speak—even small children are already masters of these arts. The variety of forms of this human essence is potentially infinite, and Las Casas recognizes that his inventory of the artistic possibilities of the Americas can only be limited. There is much more still to be encountered: "There must be other artists in those lands, many, whom we do not know about." Las Casas's definition of humanity through artistic intelligence arrives to a point where American creativity even exceeds any previously known human ingenium: "But what certainly seems to exceed all human inventiveness, and which all the nations of the world will find not just curious but entirely novel, and all the more worthy of admiration and esteem, is the art that those Mexican people know how to make so perfectly, of creating with natural feathers with their own natural colors everything that they and all other excellent and first-rate painters are capable of painting with brushes."

An artistic universal humanity can be demonstrated by the variety, novelty, and quality of the American technés, which, competing with and even surpassing any imaginable artistry (especially painting, the Art par excellence at the time), not only enter the realm of the metatechnés, but redefine humanity as capable of the most unpredictable creations.

Artists creating whatever they wish

Is Las Casas an isolated case? We have seen that another renowned and published author, Garcilaso de la Vega, appealed a few decades later to artistic capacity to prove the excellence of the Inca; he established a clear difference between habilidad and ingenio—ability and inventiveness (or ingenuity/wit)—to explain the asymmetry between the scarcity of their tools and the magnificence of their creations. Another important source that helps us track this debate is the famous Florentine Codex, composed in the 1570s by the Franciscan Bernardino de Sahagún in partnership with Nahua intellectuals and painters. Several parts of the Florentine Codex (also known as the Historia General de las Cosas de Nueva España) are devoted to the oficiales (creators) of New Spain and their artistic practices. An entire section of book XI, for instance, addresses...
the qualities and the types of buildings constructed before and after the conquest. Four other artistic trades are described and illustrated in the Florentine Codex: goldsmiths, lapidaries, feather artists (in book IX), and painters (in book XI).

Diana Magaloni Kerpel has called the chapters on the tlacuilo (painters) “a brief but highly significant treatise on how to make the colors to paint.”28 We see indeed all sorts of plants and minerals being processed by skillful specialists to produce the greatest variety of colors and hues. These images and the accompanying Nahuatl texts provide invaluable information, allowing historians and conservators to recuperate specific knowledge on the making of pigments.29 I would rather like to focus on the representations of painters in these pages (figs. 9–10), which we can in fact understand as self-portraits.


29. See the essays published in Colors Between Two Worlds (see note 28).
The painters seem to occupy a diametric position in relation to their peers who provide them with the *materia prima* (fig. 9). The latter are portrayed in the very act of mastering nature, almost like alchemists—gathering the cochineal insects, grinding minerals, and mixing pigments. The painters, by contrast, are (self-)portrayed confronting white paper or canvas, which is often completely blank—an empty surface waiting to be filled. The art of painting is represented at the moment just before the act of painting and drawing itself begins, or, in other cases, when the canvas has just begun to be filled with little details (a leaf, a glyph) that will end up taking another meaning once the work is finished. Is this not an extremely modern representation of the artistic act?

A passage by Bartolomé de Las Casas helps us interpret these images. After praising the superiority of the artists of New Spain (pre- and postconquest), especially feather artists, the Dominican states: “They regularly made many things from feathers, such as animals and birds and men, capes or tunics to cover themselves, vestments for priests along with crowns or miters, shields and fans, and a thousand other types of things as they wished.” Las Casas reports that pre-Columbian artists—far from being limited by a lack of imagination or an imposed visual repertoire—were free to create whatever they pleased. This may or may not be true. But what is more important, from our perspective, is that American artistic activity is presented not only as a demonstration of the humanity and rationality of people from all around the world, but also of the artistic freedom and desire of the creators.

There is, however, another implication in the *Florentine Codex’s* self-portraits of painters, which we can approach with the help of other well-known early modern sources on artistic activity.

Another art history?

If we go back to the established scholarship on the “long and gradual transition” that took place between 1350 and 1600 “from the old art/craft system toward our modern fine art system”—from the conception of artistic activity as a “mechanical” art to a “liberal” one—we learn that this is understood to have happened in Europe.31 There, the notion of art as skilled labor and useful service gave way to a new idea of art as being rooted in imagination, grace, and freedom. One of the paradigmatic moments of this story is Michelangelo’s claim that Pope Julius II permitted him to “do what [he] wished” in the Sistine Chapel.32 But perhaps we can also trace this transformation in the definition of art through the writers discussed above, and their reactions to the novelty of the objects encountered in the context of Iberian expansion. Las Casas’s claim that the Mexican feather artists can do “a thousand other types of things as they wished” resonates differently if we put it in the larger context of this debate. The positing of art as a demonstration of humanity, rationality, and freedom seems now a bold statement not only in relation to the American populations, but also in relation to the art theory that was being written in Europe at the time. The texts that compose the Iberian archive, in the Americas and beyond, are therefore not only part of an immense corpus of historical descriptions—they also touch on broader issues that are anthropological, philosophical, and deeply art historical in nature. If it is true that the sources addressed here redefine humanity as inherently artistic in its ability to create anything it wishes, and that they also redefine art as characterized by the intelligence of making, we are therefore witnessing something more than a non-European chapter of a literature of art. These sources reveal a major shift in the conception of artistic activity, and the definition of humanity as not only capable of, but necessarily related to, artistic activity itself. The Iberian archive could, therefore, have also propelled this shift.

Paradoxically, however, through our Iberian sources we can also trace the first moments of another narrative—one in which artistic invention becomes gradually separated from its materiality. It is interesting

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30. Las Casas (see note 19), p. 325: “Solían hacer muchas cosas de plumá, como animales y aves y hombres, capas o mantas para se cobrir, y vestimentos para los sacerdotes y coronas o mitras, rodelas y moscaderos y otras mil maneras de cosas que se les antojaban.”

to compare the artists depicted in the Florentine Codex to one of the allegories of painting published in Vicente Carducho’s Diálogos de la pintura half a century later (fig. 11). The engraving, by Francisco Fernández, depicts a brush being set upon a blank canvas, as if magically moved by an invisible hand. A banderole bears a rather obscure inscription, potentia ad actum tamquam tabula rasa (“power to act as tabula rasa”), while a poem elaborates on the meaning of the composition:

En la que tabla rasa tanto excede,
que ve todas las cosas en potencia,
sólo el pincel con soberana ciencia,
reducir la potencia al acto puede

The blank canvas surpasses so many things because it sees all things in potentia; only the brush with sovereign science can reduce this potential to actuality.  

Perhaps those elegant painters (self-)portrayed in the Florentine Codex half a century before Carducho’s treatise, depicted with their brushes and pencils in the

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act of inventing in front of blank surfaces, already herald this new conception of the art and the act of painting. They recall Leonardo’s description of the painter: “the painter sits before his work at the greatest of ease, well dressed and applying delicate colours with his light brush, and he may dress himself in whatever clothes he pleases.” The Florentine Codex painters would therefore also be a sign of the beginning of an “idea-based” art history that reduces the materiality of an artifact to the mechanical aspect of the process, whereas the “idea” is associated with the liberal possibilities of artistic invention.\textsuperscript{37} The Florentine Codex is therefore one of the first sources that unequivocally elevates and represents painting to a liberal art, but also separates the idea and the matter. Created outside Europe, the codex becomes in this way the bearer of a contradictory and troubling “modernity”: a site where painting is recognized as a free and creative activity, but also a site where the “conceptual” and “technical” dimensions of the artistic work are understood to be antipodal—leading to the problematic division, still in vogue today, between intellectual and manual labor.\textsuperscript{38}

The final implication of our proposal is, therefore, to challenge the historiographic model that has been overused in studies of the impact of pre-Columbian and early postconquest artifacts on European intellectual history and art history: the quest for the marvelous, the place these objects occupied in cabinets of wonders, and so on. Only by freeing ourselves from the “exotic” interpretation that has reduced these objects to mere puppets of a hegemonic attitude, and by broadening our perspective on the contemporaneous theoretical debates in early modern Europe, will we be able to analyze how American (but also Asian and African) objects entered into these debates at full speed and generated new outcomes, such as the redefinition of what art and humanity can be—debates that have remained alive several centuries later and concern us all today.

\begin{figure}[h]
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\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{Figure_11.png}
\caption{Francisco Fernández, allegory of painting published in Vicente Carducho, Diálogos de la pintura: su defensa, origen, esencia, definición, modos y diferencias (1633), p. 81. Photo: Courtesy of the Hispanic Society of America, New York.}
\end{figure}

\footnotesize
\textsuperscript{35} Paula Mues Orts has studied the impact of Carducho’s allegories of painting on the art of seventeenth-century New Spain; P. Mues Orts, “Los siete colores de la Pintura: tratadística y afirmación pública de la dignidad del arte en el siglo XVII novohispano,” Anales del Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas 33, no. 99 (2011): 71–110. I propose that the Florentine Codex’s images of painters indicate this shift in the conception of painting already in the 1570s.

\textsuperscript{36} Leonardo (see note 32), p. 39.

\textsuperscript{37} On this kind of art history, and for a criticism of it, see the introduction in G. Siracusano, Pigments and Power in the Andes: From the Material to the Symbolic in Andean Cultural Practices, 1500–1800 (London, 2011).

\textsuperscript{38} The division between intellectual and manual labor was recently critiqued by Alain Badiou in his lecture, “The Fundamental Contradictions of the Contemporary World,” Maison Française, Columbia University, December 15, 2014.