

DOMINICAN ARCHITECTURE

DOMINICAN ARCHITECTURE IN SIXTEENTH-CENTURY OAXACA. By ROBERT J. MULLEN. (Tempe: Arizona State University, Center for Latin American Studies, 1975. Pp. 260. \$12.95.)

The session on Colonial Latin American art held 3 November 1977, during the LASA meeting in Houston, symbolized the range of people involved in the field; in addition to Donald Robertson, one of the acknowledged leaders of Latin American studies, we heard talks by James Ramsey, a new, young face on the scene who was teaching at Vanderbilt, and Agustín Zapata Gollán, an elderly Argentine whose life-long research on Colonial urbanization is virtually unknown in this country because of the ephemeral nature of some Latin American publications (in newspapers, brochures, bulletins of local societies and universities). Afterwards, a small group of people interested in Latin American art history met at a luncheon sponsored by the newly formed Research Center for the Arts of the University of Texas at San Antonio. The Center represents a very positive attempt by the Dean of Fine and Applied Arts, Jacinto Quirarte, to focus on Iberian and Latin American studies and to remedy the lack of cross-fertilization among people in the discipline. A conference series was proposed to provide a forum at which to present the status of our work and to resolve problems encountered.

In a group like this, one notices that most of the interested people in the field of Latin American art have been trained outside that special discipline. Very few schools in the world provide specific training for such specialists, in fact. But all of us have been captivated, often in spite of our own intentions, by the neglected monuments and their obvious relationships, and feel an obligation to present the plain facts and put the relationships in order. A large percentage of people in the field come from architecture: many Latin Americans who do the best documentary research are trained architects, while architectural historians are often the most prolific in this country. The representational arts are more neglected, perhaps due to a feeling that they are of a less high quality than the architecture and are more slavishly derivative of Iberian prototypes. The emphatic religious context in which they were created has turned away many Latin American students. A photographic archive that collects, records and indexes, and preserves good illustrations of works throughout the area is badly needed; only some national archives have begun to remedy this, from the long-established one of INAH in Mexico to newly formed ones in Peru and Venezuela (and perhaps Brazil). The first is underfunded, while the second and third depend on private initiative. An inter-American agency needs to coordinate such an archive and underwrite the printing of copies from negatives in private hands, such as those of the Kelemens and De Mesas. Only in this way can some obvious links that connect the various republics be studied; for example, the architecture of Becerra (the cathedral builder with attributed works in

Mexico City, Puebla, Quito, Lima, and Cuzco) and the paintings of Bitti (which have been done), Medoro (barely sketched) and Goribar (normally considered an Ecuadorian, but whose hand I have seen in Cuzco Cathedral).

The output by researchers in Colonial Latin American art history is surprising in spite of these difficulties, as testified by the bibliographic review by Elizabeth Wilder Weismann in the pages of this journal in Spring 1975. We now have fewer generalists and more specialists, a situation that can be healthy for the careful documentation and intimate analysis that each region, city, and even building merits. Elisa Vargas Lugo and Marco Diaz of Mexico have conducted such studies, as Sidney Markman of Duke continues to do on Chiapas, based on his published experience with Antigua, Guatemala. Later, when such careful individual monographs are summarized, we can expect to have sweeping surveys that will be based on sound facts.

The book at hand, by Robert J. Mullen, presents a superb example of the rewards to be reaped from such careful local study. Mullen himself is a recent convert to Latin American studies, and has approached this subject with "a feeling of wonderment and awe." The year of his retirement from the U.S. intelligence service, he received the University of Maryland's first doctorate in art history in 1971; he submitted as his dissertation the first version of this book. Some of the jumpy quality of the book may result from a tendency in dissertations to try to cover every aspect of the topic and from the need to shorten his original 397 pages. In the book Mullen performs the tremendous service of analyzing untapped documentary evidence in the *Actas* of periodic Chapter meetings, which provide firm support for the chronology of the buildings: which came first, and which ones were the friars looking at before they were sent out to found new houses. Mullen finds links between certain houses like Teposcolula, Coixtlahuaca, and Yanhuítlán (all gems of Mexican architecture) and notes that a Fray Francisco Marín was named vicar of these houses in succession. He therefore can lift the veil of anonymity off these monuments of creative genius and designate Fray Marín as the chief "wandering architectural entrepreneur" (p. 141) of the Dominicans. Other names of the builder-friars are cited in Mullen's important chapter 6.

Much early writing about Colonial art was on the level of esthetic or iconographic appreciation, since facts about artists, commissions, even the original locations of sculptures and paintings remained unknown to us. Mullen is able to retain some sense of the beauty of the work while he puts his observations to the service of reconstructing the evolution of a building and of seeing the influence of a person or style. He follows George Kubler's typology for the analysis of plans, which has been the standard study since 1948. He seems less indebted to John McAndrew's monumental synthesis, *The Open-Air Churches of Sixteenth-Century Mexico*, than one might expect, perhaps because McAndrew's long-researched work appeared only in 1965 and concentrated on the exterior aspects such as the courtyards (*atrios*). Curiously, both authors fix upon the unfinished basilica at Cuilapan as the most extraordinary monument of the age and region. Mullen devotes his entire chapter 5 to a "case history" of this work, and shows how the knowledge of the documents needs to be played against a

discerning eye in concluding how the evolution of the complex building is to be reconstructed. One of the most interesting conclusions presented in the book is the influence of the Spanish architect Rodrigo Gil de Hontañón, perhaps the supreme practitioner of the Plateresque style, who did specific work for the Dominicans in Spain at Salamanca, Plasencia, and Casalarreina. While it was beyond the scope of Mullen's book to discuss the evolution from Late Gothic through Plateresque to the "Renaissance" (most usually called Severe or Herre-ran) styles, clearer characterizations of these styles should have been included for the lay aficionados of Oaxaca, who should find the book fascinating and indispensable.

One surely hates to criticize the publishers of a book that probably will not find a very large audience, given the level of scholarly involvement with Latin America. But Mexico at least has a large group of devotees, most of whom want their information more encapsulated than the text provides (although appendix 1 devotes a page to each building group with factual information provided in an outline form). If only to ensure more sales, the publishers should have attempted to give the book greater "punch" in terms of more contrasting photographs and a more coherent presentation of each building. As the book now stands, the photos are broken up in groups of four (usually), located without much concern for their reference in the text, shrunk and boxed within a border the same size as the text block instead of using the full size of the page, and converted to pale sepia on an obtrusive creamy-yellow paper. The whole has a fussy, antiquarian feel instead of eye-grabbing strength. Each chapter is really quite short, although the abrupt intrusion of the illustrations makes it seem longer. Much factual documentation has been relegated to a series of rear appendices (30 percent of the entire volume!).

The pre-Hispanic culture of the Mixtec and the Zapotec Indians is sketched in chapter 2 and, disjointedly, appendix 2. Mullen tackles the difficult job of separating the cultural from the ethnic differences between the two major Oaxacan language groups, Mixtec and Zapotec, during the Postclassic, just before the Conquest; for instance, the sacred city of the Zapotec kings, Mitla, has buildings decorated in diagonal geometric stone blocks such as are found illustrated on platforms in the painted Mixtec codices. The attempt to link pre-Conquest culture with post-Conquest products, a continuous theme in studies searching for the distinctiveness of Latin American art, is no more successful here than it has been in the numerous attempts since the rise of Latin American cultural identity in the early part of this century. Mullen can only suggest that "the Dominican missionaries in Oaxaca released reservoirs of artistic energies submerged and largely untapped during the previous several centuries" (p. 19). Whether called *mestizo* or *tequitqui*, the Indian contribution to Colonial culture (beyond early painting and sculpture) soon disappears, even though we know many Indians remained artisans. Surely the sixteenth century was a brilliant age in Mexican art, with new solutions to new problems, but the architecture was the result primarily of Spanish mutation of its own culture rather than a fusion with Indian culture, which had been effectively beheaded. This same mutation can be found in the extravagant Ultrabaroque of the eighteenth century, when

the pre-Hispanic cultures were long forgotten. Recent research has shown a healthy down-playing of invariant ethnic stylistic tendencies as against local responses to particular problems. The presentation of these problems and the tracing of their solutions in Oaxaca—or, to be more inclusive, part of the former Dominican province of Santiago—makes Mullen's book a treasure. We now need to know more about the solutions in the other major part of that province of Santiago reserved for the Dominicans, the present Mexican state of Michoacán, where many magnificent building groups remain from the sixteenth century.

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