Dallas Museum of Art Biombo: Elite Spanish Identity and Hybridity in 18th Century Colonial Latin America

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Abstract:

First appearing in the Americas in the early 17th century, the folding screens of New Spain, or biombos as they are known in Spanish, would come to embellish the homes and palaces of the elite and join a litany of other precious objects as must-have accessories for secular spaces. In their various permutations, they reflect the changing tastes and fashions of a world increasingly connected through global economic exchange and the politics of the colonial period. Using a late 18th century example found in the collection of the Dallas Museum of the Art, the paper explores the biombo as an exemplary model of hybridity that consolidated European, Asian, and Latin American histories. As such, the biombo participated in the construction of an ideal elite identity for owners whose marks of wealth were continually being questioned by the period’s ambivalence towards racial superiority and status.
Introduction

An object of great antiquity, the folding screens of New Spain, biombos as they are known in Spanish, would come to embellish the luxurious interiors of the wealthy after their introduction from Japan and China. 1 Although very few Asian examples from antiquity survive, literature from second century BCE China speaks of their creation in glass, others were carved and inlaid with jade, some embroidered, upholstered or lacquered. Made with upwards of forty individual panels, they could be found in palaces and mansions of royalty, not altogether unlike where they would be found in New Spain centuries later. One faced or two, they are seldom found outside the homes of the Spanish elite, though a few ended up in religious houses and prisons.2 The majority of biombos displayed secular content that fit their secular setting: historical paintings (the conquest of Mexico was a favorite subject), landscape views, hunting scenes, and, for our purposes, allegorical images based on popular European emblem books. The Dallas biombo (see Figure 1) found in the collection of the Dallas Museum of Art falls in this latter category, whose imagery is shared by a small corpus of similar works that duplicate, to great exactitude, a selection of prints from the Flemish artist Otto Van Veen’s emblem book, Quinti Horatii flacci emblemata.3 Already, from this information, we can come to see that the painted and gilded biombo from 1740-1760 is an exemplary model of the hybridity of eighteenth century colonial Latin America, consolidating European, Asian, and Latin American histories in the homes of the elite.

In New Spain

In colonial homes, with rooms that opened up to open patios, biombos would have been indispensable utilitarian objects that also satisfied the opulence of New Spanish palaces. In its
original context, the Dallas biombo would have been found in the salon del estrado, a type of common area where families partook in various leisure activities on top of a low platform or estrado. Velvet pillows from the Moorish tradition – later chairs and couches – were placed on top, and the biombo rodastrado, named for its location and identifiable by the legs that provide a gap between the floor and the panel’s bottom, acted as a kind of theatrical backdrop. Biombos for the bedroom (biombos de cama), on the other hand, would touch the floor and were taller to provide privacy. The content of the Dallas biombo, however, is not exclusive to biombos rodastrados, as biombos de cama also contain reproductions of Van Veen’s emblem images. See Figure 2. In eight panels that measure just under four feet in height and two in width, the Flemish artist’s color reproductions have been painted amidst an intricate program of mythical characters, still-lives, vegetative motifs, and Asian-like characters in various stages of leisure. One of its most glaring elements, of course, is the vivid red color of the background, a stylistic choice that references New Spain’s affinity for chinoiserie or Chinese-looking objects inspired by the politics and economics of the Manila galleons as well as contemporary European tastes.

Origins of Eastern Aesthetics

In Europe, the biombos had made appearances as early as the sixteenth century, arriving first in Portugal and later Spain, spreading throughout the continent and acquiring their own specific names (England – screen; Germany – spanische wand). For the New Spanish colony, it would be the Manila galleons that would bring about their introduction. Each year, one single ship known as the galleon would travel from Manila in the Philippines to Acapulco (the only American stop on the west coast) carrying with it all the trade of the orient. Acapulco’s proximity to Mexico City gave it an obvious advantage, but it remained a fixed location for over two and a half centuries despite various proposals for relocation, as many navigators had come to
see the harbor as one of the safest and most picturesque locations in New Spain.\textsuperscript{6} It was through Acapulco, a city that boasted a diverse racial makeup – particularly during the \textit{feria} (fair) that drew thousands when the galleon was unloaded - that foreign goods filtered into New Spain and introduced the first biombos.

The first documented examples are from the early seventeenth century. In an act of diplomacy between Spanish and Japanese officials after the expulsion of the Spanish Jesuits, the Shogun Ieyasu Tokugawa, desirous of commercial trade with the Spanish, gave stranded general of the Philippines Rodrigo de Vivero y Aberruza four thousand gold coins, a ship to facilitate his trip back to Spain, and luxury objects for the viceroy Luis de Velasco.\textsuperscript{7} It is presumed that in this trip, Vivero brought with him the first biombo. Shortly after, in 1614, Tokugawa sent five gold pairs of biombos to fortify his ties of friendship and goodwill.

This exchange between the western and eastern world can be seen in the Dallas biombo, especially with the use of the \textit{chinoserie} style. The term is somewhat of a misnomer, as it also looked to Japanese lacquers and Indian cottons.\textsuperscript{8} For an eighteenth century New Spanish and European audience however, the cultural and social diversity represented by this style was just as amorphous as Moorish art had been throughout the colonial period and just as indistinct as the people in Acapulco, who were referred collectively as “Chinos.”\textsuperscript{9} Although the panels retain chromatic and formal similarity, \textit{chinoiserie} was also a style of caprice and excess that was easily paired with French Rococo. Where an authentically Japanese screen might use negative space in a composition, the biombo artist abandoned restraint. Each of Van Veen’s reproductions are housed in their own frame made out of c-scrolls, half-bodied humans in skirts with large heads, sprouting floral arrangements, birds, and topped by a jeweled crown where an eagle carries a snake in its beak, a nod to the Aztec origin story of Mexico City. See Figure 3.
The profusion of decoration and patterning is tempered in a later biombo using the same emblem book, now seen in a historical society in Richmond, Virginia. See Figure 4. The Richmond example employs a decidedly more Neoclassical vocabulary. With its strict organization of registers, architectural mimicry, and simply framed reproductions, a chronological sequence has been suggested for it, placing it after the Dallas biombo - made perhaps during or after the later part of the eighteenth century - as chinoserie and rococo gave way to the dominance of Neoclassicism through the foundation of the Academy of San Carlos in Mexico City.  

**European Elitist Origins**

The biombo’s other major international flavor is provided by the oil reproductions of Van Veen’s emblems. A prized artist in Germany, Rome, and the Netherlands; a product of noble birth; and teacher to Peter Paul Rubens, Van Veen was, to be sure, a successful artist by the time his book began circulation in Europe in 1607, which brought his talents as a printmaker to an all-time high. In a matter of a few years, the book would see translations in German, French, Italian, and other major European languages. To be sure, the work was part of a much larger historical moment that was experiencing the effects of the Counterreformation and, specifically, the Council of Trent, whose ecumenical experts had restructured the use of images in its twenty-fifth and final session and which would transform the reception and transmission of religious images. One consequence was the popularity of emblematic literature, with its fusion of text and image as pedagogical devices. As a generic type, the emblem book draws from European history, demands high literacy from its audience, and is distinguished by its dependency on image, motto, and poem to complete two functions: representation and interpretation, which, together, offer expressions of universal ‘truths’. Van Veen’s emblem book
*Quinti Horatii*, for example, was a careful selection of quotes from the writings of the ancient Roman poet Horace, which were then paired, characteristically, with allegorical images and mottos. In sum, it came to perfectly embody the mentality of the counterreformation, through its author who was an ardent Catholic and with its reverence for writings from antiquity that were seen to antedate much Christian doctrine.

Given the extent and reach of Van Veen’s singular publication, it was then only a matter of time before *Quinti Horatti* acquired readership among the elite creole population in Latin America, who rabidly absorbed the trends and styles of Europe. Over thirty of them even made their way to an azulejos tile program – so named for the use of blue and white ceramic panels - in the Brazilian cloister of the convent of San Francisco de Bahía. See Figure 5.\(^\text{13}\) In New Spain, Van Veen’s emblems, poems, and mottoes were published in *Theatro Moral de Toda la Philosophia de los Antiguos y Modernos*, a Spanish edition by Francisco Foppes in 1699 that added additional commentary for each emblem.\(^\text{14}\) In the Dallas biombo, Foppes’ Spanish mottos, identifying the emblems, are placed in a small horizontal scroll at the top, while the poems are in an oval frame at the bottom, surrounded by an ornate frame atop a platter of fruit. In addition to the already prestigious status that the emblems enjoyed in Europe, epigrams were known to be a fixture in indigenous cultures. In another eighteenth century example, verses and short dialogues are combined and shown emerging from the mouths of native and European characters, which are strongly reminiscent of codices and native pictographic speech scrolls. See Figure 6.\(^\text{15}\) All this to say, however, that the emblem books remained the exclusive consumption of elite circles, much like *chinoserie* and biombos, whereby the availability of Foppes’s *Threatro Moral* reinforced many aspects of creole identity, as exhibited in some of the reproductions selected for the Dallas biombo.
Comparative Examples and Interpretation

Two of the most common reproductions from the *Threatro Moral*, found in at least three other known biombos, are *Seguro Está Quien Viviere Bien* and *La Fortuna no Muda el Linaje* (see Figure 7), roughly translated to “safe is he who lives well” and “fortunate does not hide lineage” found on the second and seventh panel, respectively.

*Seguro Está Quien Viviere Bien* presents the story of Aeschylus, an Athens tragedian whose impending death inside his home was foretold by a Sicilian soothsayer, spurring the playwright to seek a life *en plein air*, to avoid his fate. An eagle flew over him one day, however, carrying a tortoise in its claws; trying to break it open, it mistook Aeschylus’ head for a pointy rock, dropping it and killing the playwright. All four biombos that display this emblem do not deviate from Van Veen’s engraving, showing a man in old age; book in hand with writing implements to his side, as a large bird prepares to make its drop. In the distance, a small and fortified town can be seen. Together, the image and text offers a criticism of men who consult fortune-tellers, and ultimately are punished by God’s plan.

In the seventh panel, *La Fortuna no Muda el Linaje*, Fortune is personified as a woman with a billowing garment, covered eyes, and rudder. Fortune is shown blindly favoring those who are bold over the prudent, represented by a grinning monkey with folded arms, exalting its presumptuousness with an assortment of undeserved royal regalia that includes a crown, scepter, and cloak. Of the three other biombos that reproduce this engraving, only one alters the scene, replacing a lakeside city in the background with a pastoral, rural backdrop.

In both of these examples, we may find that the consistency of the emblems across four stylistically different biombos constitutes a concerted effort on the part of the artists and owners to build a specific identity unique to the Latin American context, done so primarily through an
appropriation of information received from overseas. The story of Aeschylus, with its light-hearted and amusing narrative, could communicate an intellectual familiarity with famous men of antiquity and moralizing themes while avoiding a heavily didactic approach unsuitable to the leisure activities that were commonplace in the salon del estrado. Its poem and motto could offer the occasional meditation with an ease of comprehension that could, outside of its palatial setting, prove difficult to understand to the uninitiated, thereby legitimizing and celebrating owners for being ‘in-the-know’.18

Similarly, the use of La Fortuna no Muda el Linaje communicates another iteration of exclusivity, one of social status and its guardianship by the titled nobility, particularly considering the rapid dilution and fluctuation of these groups in New Spain. Peninsular immigrants were at the top, a group less than five percent of the Mexican population, and were wildly dismissive of social mobility by creoles.19 The stability of American Spaniards was continually tested, if not by a realization that they were on a downward spiral with any influx of Peninsular immigration than by a lack of methods by which to appraise themselves or others save for excess consumption that could potentially lead to financial ruin, as it often did. The reappearance of the Fortuna emblem, time and again, can be thus seen as a signifier of the anxiety felt by the schizophrenic rise and fall of status and wealth; and of an indefinable ‘something’ in lineage that could not be bought, no matter how blindly some implements could be given to the grinning monkeys of New Spain. Indeed, peninsular animosity was likely wakened by the time the Bourbon reforms started selling positions in state and church to the highest bidder in the first half of the eighteenth century; participation that was actively fought against and defeated in some cases as when the judicial bureaucracy known as the audiencia was cut by a third of its creole members.20
To own a biombo in a Latin American home was therefore much more than simply filling living spaces with precious, imported luxury goods. The placement of the biombos of New Spain testified to and added real physical presence to the gained and rightfully deserved wealth, intellect, and privilege of a select few of *gente decente*. They could combine, with ease, centuries of international histories and stylistic traditions into one cosmopolitan furniture piece. Together with other luxury goods, the Dallas biombo could very well participate in constructing an ideal elite identity out of many others, within a time and place where the hybridity of cultures and societies was inevitable, bumping against each other and offering those with the means a veritable multiple choice of their own personhood.
Endnotes

1 From the Japanese word Byobu, meaning protection from the wind (byo-protection; bu-wind). The M was added in Portugal to become *biombo*. See Teresa Castelló Yturbiú and Marita Martínez del Río de Redo, “Introduccion,” *Biombos Mexicanos*, (Mexico City: INAH, 1970) 11.
2 Emily Umberger, “The Monarchia Indiana in Seventeenth Century New Spain,” in *Converging Cultures: Art and Identity in Spanish America*, ed. Diana Fane, exhibition catalog, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1996) 47.
3 Michael J. Schreffler, “Emblems of Virtue in Eighteenth-Century New Spain,” in *Woman and Art in Early Modern Latin America*, ed Kellen Kee McIntyre and Richard E. Phillips, (Boston: Brill, 2007) 266.
4 Kelly Donahue-Wallace, “Secular Painting Circa 1600-1800,” in *Art and Architecture of Viceregal Latin America, 1521-1821* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2008) 212.
5 “Manila as the Spanish Gateway to the East,” *Bulletin of the Business Historical Society* 4, no. 4 (June 1930): 3.
6 William Lytle Schurz, “Acapulco and the Manila Galleon,” *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 22, no.1 (July 1918): 18-20.
7 Castelló Yturbiú, “El Galeon de Manila,” 27 and Gustavo Curiel, “Los Biombos Novohispanos: Escenografías de poder y transculturación en el ámbito domestic,” in *Viento detenido: Mitologías e historias en el arte del biombo. Colección de biombos de los siglos XVII al XIX del Museo Soumaya*, (Mexico City: Museo Soumaya, 1999) 14.
8 A. Hyatt Mayor, “Chinoiserie,” *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 36, no.5 (May 1941): 112.
9 William Lytle Schurz, “Acapulco and the Manila Galleon,” 22.
10 Schreffler, “Emblems of Virtue in Eighteenth-Century New Spain,” 271.
11 Stephen Orgel, Introduction. *van Veen, Otto, Horatii emblemata: Antwerp, 1612*. (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1979) and Santiago Sebastián López, “Theatro Moral de la Vida Humana de Otto Vaenius; lectura y significado de los emblemas,” *Boletin del Museuo e Instituto Camón Aznar* 14 (1983) 9.
12 Santiago Sebastián, “Los Libros de Emblemas: Use y Difusión en Iberoamérica,” in *Juegos de Ingenio y Agudeza: la pintura emblematica de la Nueva España*, (Mexico City: Patronato del Museo Nacional de Arte, 1994) 56-57.
13 Santiago Sebastián López, “La meditación barroca de la muerte,” in *Viento detenido: Mitologías e historias en el arte del biombo. Colección de biombos de los siglos XVII al XIX del Museo Soumaya*. (Mexico City: Museo Soumaya, 1999) 196 and Santiago Sebastián, “Los Libros de Emblemas: Use y Difusión en Iberoamérica,” 64.
14 Schreffler, “Emblems,” 266 and 273.
15 See Yturbiú “Los Proverbios en Los Biombos,” 113.
16 Santiago Sebastián López, “Theatro Moral,” 35.
17 Santiago Sebastián López, “Theatro Moral,” 26.
18 Marita Martínez del Rio de Redo, “Los Biombos en el Ambito Domestic: Sus Programas Moralizadores y Didacticos,” in *Juegos de Ingenio y Agudeza: La Pintura Emblematica de la Nueva España*, exhibition catalog (Mexico City: Patronato del Museo Nacional de Arte, 1994) 140.
19 D. A. Brading, “Government and Elite in Late Colonial Mexico,” *The Hispanic American Historical Review* 53, no. 3 (August 1973): 390.
20 D. A. Brading, “Government and Elite in Late Colonial Mexico,” 402-403.
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Figure 1. Biombo
Spanish colonial, probably Mexico City
Viceroyalty of New Spain, c. 1740-1760
Oil on canvas, pine, and gilding

Collection of the Dallas Museum of Art
**Figure 2.** Anonymous, Proverbs

*oil on canvas*

*18th century*

*Biombo of ten panels*

In *Viento Detenido: Mitologías e Historias en el Arte del Biombo. Colección de Biombos de los Siglos XVII al XIX del Museo Soumaya*. Mexico City: Museo Soumaya, 1999. Print
Figure 3. Detail, topmost part of panel

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Figure 4. Sections with the emblems “Love Virtue for Itself”, “Virtue is Steadfast”, “Virtue Consists in the Mean” and “Virtue is the Target of Envy”
Collection of Virginia Historical Society
Richmond, Virginia
Late 18th century/Early 19th Century

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Figure 5. Azulejos tile program in the cloister of the convent of San Francisco de Bahía

In Viento detenido: Mitologías e historias en el arte del biombo. Colección de biombos de los siglos XVII al XIX del Museo Soumaya, 195-206. Mexico City: Museo Soumaya, 1999. Print.
Figure 6.
Figure 6a. (Left) Detail of 18th century biombo.
Castelló Yturride, Teresa, and Marita Martínez del Río de Redo. *Biombos Mexicanos*. Mexico City: INAH, 1970. Print.

Figure 6a. (Right) Fray Bernardino de Sahagún
Florentine Codex: Book Two, Part Three, fol. 68. 1575-80
Tempera and Ink on paper
Biblioteca Medicea-Laurenziana
Florence, Italy
Donahue-Wallace, Kelly. *Art and Architecture of Viceregal Latin America, 1521-1821*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2008. 200-223. Print.
Figure 7. Panel 2 and Panel 7 detail: Seguro Está Quien Viviere Bien and La Fortuna no Muda el Linaje in its various permutations across four different biombos.

Top left: Detail of Dallas Biombo. Copyright Jonathan A. Molina Garcia 2012
Top right and bottom left: In Juegos de Ingenio y Agudeza: La Pintura Emblematica de la Nueva España. Exhibition catalog. Mexico City: Patronato del Museo Nacional de Arte, 1994. Print.
Bottom right: In Viento Detenido: Mitologías e Historias en el Arte del Biombo. Colección de Biombos de los Siglos XVII al XIX del Museo Soumaya. Mexico City: Museo Soumaya, 1999. Print