

## Editorial

In December 1999, a series of paintings depicting themes from the overall subject of *The Conquest of Mexico* by an unknown seventeenth-century Mexican School artist (estimate £500,000 to £800,000) sold for £2 million “to a North American collector”, as the press reported. Afterwards, the pictures were held in the Jay I. Kislak Foundation before being donated to the Library of Congress in 2004.<sup>1</sup> The successful auction of these large paintings – each was two metres wide – is a reminder how the ongoing fascination with the early history of the Americas continues to translate into marketability.

More recently, a large seventeenth-century folding screen, a so-called *biombo*, was offered at auction for a seven-figure dollar estimate. The fact that this sale was held online reflects changed capabilities in art sale marketing, for one thing – unwieldy historical objects which can be presented to a wide audience using enhanced technical capabilities are no longer deemed to require a physical preview and presence – but even more so, policies of cultural heritage protection: the object is considered national heritage and cannot be exported from Mexico. To play devil’s advocate, were this huge screen located in Spain, would there be an argument for it to qualify as Spanish national heritage, since it illustrates momentous events both in Spanish and Mexican history? In any case, the restriction may well have been a factor in the object remaining unsold.

The entangled art history of the Spanish Spanish overseas territories certainly continues to receive scholarly attention on both sides of the Atlantic: “Painting from the Viceroyalties. Shared Identities” in the Hispanic World was the title of an exhibition at the Prado in Madrid and Mexico City in 2010/11. This may bring to mind recent debates about the term “shared heritage”, but so far the Spanish domain in America has not become a politically hot topic in the same way as European colonialism in Africa. It can certainly be argued that the two represent historically different phenomena. Identities and heritage may have been shared or not, depending on perspectives, but trade in this vast empire was most certainly a shared activity which worked in all directions. Meanwhile, historical research also continues on the earlier period before the Spanish invasion, as the

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1 Cf. <https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/exploring-the-early-americas/conquest-of-mexico-paintings.html>.

Getty Institute just launched a new initiative to research art and its collectors in a project on “Pre-Hispanic Art Provenance”.

The Spanish conquest in South America was not only driven by a desire for exploration to prove that the Earth was a sphere but also by economic considerations. The economy of the colonies transplanted Castilian society overseas, including art markets, with two-way trade routes. The above-mentioned eight paintings in the Library of Congress depict encounters of power as well as culture, derived from a European concept of depictions of battle scenes, but set in an entirely new environment.

In art market research, as in the actual current art market, much of the focus has shifted towards contemporary art and the accompanying phenomena: financialisation, interactions, conflicts of interest, issues of transparency and the role of the artist as defined since the nineteenth century. However, as a journal devoted to research on the art market of all periods and geographical areas, we should not lose sight of earlier markets and the rich vein of results that research continues to mine from them.

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