Les Cahiers d'Afrique de l'Est / The East African Review

51 | 2016

Global History, East Africa and The Classical Traditions

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Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/eastafrica/323>

DOI: 10.4000/eastafrica.323

ISSN: 2790-1076

Publisher

IFRA - Institut Français de Recherche en Afrique

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 March 2016

Number of pages: 129-149

ISSN: 2071-7245

Electronic reference

Paul B. Niell, "El Temple: Civic Monument, African Significations, and the Dialectics of Colonial Urban Space in Early Nineteenth-Century Havana, Cuba", *Les Cahiers d'Afrique de l'Est / The East African Review* [Online], 51 | 2016, Online since 07 May 2019, connection on 09 December 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/eastafrica/323> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/eastafrica.323>

El Temple: Civic Monument, African Significations, and the Dialectics of Colonial Urban Space in Early Nineteenth-Century Havana, Cuba

Paul B. Niell

On March 19, 1828, Havana, Cuba inaugurated a civic memorial for the east side of the city's Plaza de Armas. The event climaxed a three-day festival officially designated to honor the founding of the city and the name-day of Spain's Queen Maria Josepha, wife of his Majesty Ferdinand VII (r. 1813-29, 1833). The work commemorated the site of a symbolic ceiba tree, under which the Spanish conquistadors established Havana in the sixteenth century according to eighteenth-century sources. The colonial press corroborated this narrative and hailed the memorial as "the ultimate proof of [the city's] refined loyalty and of its never contradicted patriotism."¹ Cuban military engineer José María de la Torre designed a classicizing building, known as *El Temple*, to house three history paintings visually narrating the foundational story of the site (Figure 1). French expatriate artist Jean-Baptiste Vermay (c. 1786-1833), a former student in Paris of Jacques-Louis David, painted the three works for the building's small interior space. The press affirmed that this exquisite work of fine art indicated Havana's ascendancy as a modern city, of its elevation to "the rank of the most cultured towns of Europe."²

Figure 1. Antonio María de la Torre. *El Temple*. 1827-8. Havana, Cuba. Photograph © Paul Niell.

¹ "la última prueba de su lealtad y de su patriotismo nunca desmentido," *Diario de la Habana*, 16, Mar. 1828, p. 1.

² "al rango de los pueblos más cultos de Europa," see "Alguna cosa más sobre el nuevo monumento erigido en la plaza de Armas," *Diario de la Habana*, 27, Mar. 1828, p. 1.

Scholars on Cuban art and cultural history have viewed El Templete primarily in terms of style, as the inaugural work of neoclassicism on the island.³ Yet, one area that could use further development is the symbolic and narrative complexity of this work in a late colonial social setting. El Templete synthesized diverse international and local forms, creating an expression that constructed multiple narratives about the Spanish empire, the island's population, and Cuba's colonial situation in the early nineteenth century and in an effort to maintain power and control.⁴ To deal with such imperial-local tensions and multiple meanings, the work can be considered a complex, multi-vocal narrative construction and as such related to Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of dialogism.⁵ Multiple voices, including those of African slaves and their Creole descendants, coalesced in a work intended to narrate the historiography and social order of the late colonial city on its main public plaza.

As such, El Templete underscores the persistent importance of the plaza in defining the colonial body politic in the nineteenth century as well as a dialectics of colonial urban space.⁶ This essay contends with this multiplicity of meaning and draws attention to the African elements at work in this colonial monument, while outlining the mechanisms used to reinforce hegemony over populations of African descent.

Re-inventing a Civic Tradition

Designers positioned El Templete on the east side of Havana's Plaza de Armas, an urban space reconstructed by Bourbon administrators in the late eighteenth century in response to the British occupation of the island in 1762.⁷ The Captain General Marqués de la Torre had ordered the plaza's transformation in 1771, according to the 2:3 (width: length) ratio in the Spanish Laws of the Indies.⁸ The Bourbons reasserted imperial order with the addition of the Palace of the Second-in-Command, 1771-76 and the Palace of the Captain General, 1776-91, which met at right angles along the north and west sides respectively (Figure 2).

³El Templete appears in numerous work of Cuban art, architectural, and urban history, including Guy Pérez Cisneros, *Características de la evolución de la pintura en Cuba* (1959; Havana: Editorial Pueblo y Educación, 2000), pp.49-50; Emilio Roig de Leuchsenring, *La Habana: Apuntes Históricos*, Tomo III (Havana: Editora del Consejo Nacional de Cultura, 1964), pp.7-14; Adelaide de Juan, *Pintura y grabado coloniales cubanos* (Havana: Instituto Cubano del Libro, 1974), p.18; Jorge Rigol, *Apuntes sobre la pintura y el grabado en Cuba: de los orígenes a 1927* (Havana: Editorial Letras Cubanas, 1982), pp. 101-2; Roberto Segre, *La Plaza de Armas de la Habana: Sinfonía urbana inconclusa* (Havana: Editorial Arte y Literatura, 1995), pp.20-22; Joaquín E. Weiss, *La arquitectura colonial cubana: siglos XVI al XIX* (Havana and Seville: Instituto Cubano del Libro, Agencia Española de Cooperación Internacional, Junta de Andalucía, 1996), p.387; Sabine Faivre D'Arcier, *Vermay: Mensajero de las Luces* (Havana: Imagen Contemporánea, 2004), pp.133-61.

⁴ The historiography of El Templete and suggested new approaches based on the reality of the multivalence of late colonial visual culture is discussed in Paul Niell, "El Templete and Cuban Neoclassicism: An Multivalent Signifier as Site of Memory," *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, Vol. 30, No. 3 (2011): 344-65.

⁵ Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin and London: University of Texas Press, 1981).

⁶ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, translated by Steven F. Rendall (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984) and Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith (1974; Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).

⁷ For the Bourbon Reforms in Cuba, see Allan J. Kuethe, *Cuba, 1753-1815: Crown, Military, and Society* (Knoxville: University Tennessee Press, 1986); Louis A. Pérez, Jr., *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995); Dolores González-Ripoll Navarro, *Cuba, la isla de los ensayos: cultura y sociedad (1790-1815)* (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 2000); and Sherry Johnson, *The Social Transformation of Eighteenth-Century Cuba* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2001).

⁸ See Jean-François Lejeune, (ed.), *Cruelty & Utopia: Cities and Landscapes of Latin America* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2003), p.21. See also Dora P. Crouch, Daniel J. Garr, and Axel I. Mundigo, *Spanish City Planning in North America* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1982).

Figure 2. Antonio Fernández de Trevejos and Pedro Medina. *Palace of the Captain General*. 1776-91. Havana, Cuba. Photograph © Paul Niell.

Fifty years later, El Temple joined the Bourbon palaces on the plaza, erected for the eastern side on the alleged site of the city's foundation. Eighteenth-century Cuban historians situated this town-founding event under a tropical ceiba tree, in situ allegedly when the Spanish conquistadors arrived in the early sixteenth century. Historian José Martín Félix de Arrate (1701-65) wrote:

Until the year 1753, a robust and leafy ceiba was conserved [in the Plaza de Armas] which, according to tradition, at the time of the colonization of Havana the first mass and *cabildo* were celebrated under its shadow, news that the...governor of this plaza, tried to preserve for posterity, by arranging to erect on the same site a memorial stone to preserve this memory.⁹

When the tree compromised the fortification wall in 1753, the captain general ordered it removed and replaced by a memorial in 1754. This work, a stone pillar with curvilinear volutes emulating the tree's buttressed trunk, accompanied three ceibas planted to flank the pillar on three sides.¹⁰ This attempt to monumentalize the tree suggests that the ceiba existed as a publically acknowledged symbol of the city associated with place and history.

⁹ "Hasta el año de 1753 se conservaba en ella robusto y frondosa la ceiba en que, según tradición, al tiempo de poblarse la Habana se celebró bajo su sombra la primera misa y cabildo, noticia que pretendió perpetuar a la posteridad el Mariscal de Campo D. Francisco Cagigal de la Vega, gobernador de esta plaza, que dispuso levantar en el mismo sitio un pordon de piedra que conserve esta memoria." José Martín Félix de Arrate, *Llave del Nuevo Mundo: antemural de las Indias Occidentales* (La Habana: Cubana de la UNESCO, 1964), pp.77-78.

¹⁰ Roberto Segre, *La Plaza de Armas*, pp.20-23.

The addition of another tree monument in 1828 reveals concerns for civic reform. A municipal act of 1819 records the Havana's *cabildo*'s assessment that the ceiba tree pillar had been suffering from neglect.¹¹ Members of the *cabildo* envisioned a new memorial to enclose the vertical monument with a palisade fence. Upon completion, this second memorial incorporated the older baroque pillar and modified its historical associations. Mixtilinear moldings in the cornice of the 1828 monument paralleled the baroque aesthetics of the earlier work and thus reveal a local translation of international neoclassicism. Hence, as the colonial press positioned *El Templete* within a framework of tastefulness, compelling the reader to regard the multiple stylistic tendencies in the monument as similarly tasteful.

For the monument's architectural form, designers appropriated the model and cultural authority of the freestanding Greco-Roman temple (Figure 3). In the portico, de la Torre appropriated a mixture of elements taken from the Tuscan and Roman Doric orders, which could have been found in the treatises of Roman architect Vitruvius and Italian Renaissance architect and theorist Andrea Palladio. Vitruvius and Palladio had been translated into Spanish editions in the late eighteenth century and used at Madrid's Royal Academy of San Fernando, which opened in 1752.¹² In Havana, members of the Patriotic Society owned such treatises and made them quasi-public through the Society library, which opened in the 1790s.¹³

Figure 3. Detail: Portico. Antonio María de la Torre. *El Templete*. 1827-8. Havana, Cuba. Photograph © Paul Niell.

¹¹ "February 5, 1819, se dio cuenta de un informe del Sr. Francisco Filomeno sobre la Petición hecha por el Sr. Bonifacio García, cuyos originales estan unidos al acta y copiado dicho informe dice así," in the notes of Emilio Roig de Leuchsenring, *La Biblioteca del Museo de la Ciudad de La Habana*.

¹² See *Renovacion, Crisis, Continuismo: La Real Academia de San Fernando en 1792* (Madrid: Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando, 1992).

¹³ See Fermín Peraza Sarausa, *Historia de la Biblioteca de la Sociedad Económica de Amigos del País* (La Habana: Anuario Bibliográfico Cubano, 1939).

Spanish regidor Francisco Rodríguez Cabrera provides a lucid account of El Templete in the *Diario* of March 16, 1828, informing us of the original positioning of the Vermay paintings. Inside the memorial, on the northern wall, “The First *Cabildo*,” completed c. 1827, depicts the Spanish conquistadors holding the first town council meeting of Havana under the ceiba tree (Figure 4). Vermay positions a figure of the Spaniard Diego Velázquez, who led the conquest of Cuba, in a central location beneath the tree. Standing before the trunk of the ceiba, Velázquez motions to a group of Spanish men to his left who converse over town plans, royal orders, and/or maps. Life-sized, naturalistic figures, and realistic spatial illusion engaged nineteenth-century audiences in an attempt to involve the colonial community in public education.

Figure 4. Jean-Baptiste Vermay. *The First Cabildo*. 1827. Oil on canvas. Photograph © Paul Niell. Reproduced with the permission of the Oficina del Historiador de la Ciudad de La Habana.

To the right of the “First Cabildo,” against the eastern interior wall, the viewer encounters the much larger, “Inauguration of El Templete,” completed c. 1828-9 (Figures 5-6). Vermay based this massive scene compositionally on Jacques-Louis David’s monumental canvas for Napoleon, “The Coronation of the Emperor and Empress,” 1805-7, oil on canvas, which Vermay exhibited alongside in the Parisian Salon of 1808.¹⁴ The inauguration scene contains portraits of Spanish officialdom, senior clergy, members of the Bourbon public, and other civic elites. The image moves the observer from a contemplation of sixteenth-century events depicted in a relatively low light, to a much brighter scene of the nineteenth-century plaza, thus juxtaposing past and present.

¹⁴ *Catalogues of the Paris Salon, 1673 to 1881*, compiled by H.W. Janson (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1977) 133 catalogue for 1808, p.91; 1810, p.103; 1812, p.102; 1815, pp.95-96.

The Cagigal pillar, one of the Bourbon palaces, and the sixteenth-century Castillo are clearly visible in the background, as communocentric references to local architectural features.¹⁵ In the center of the painting and the represented crowd stands the figure of Captain General Francisco Dionisio Vives (r. 1824-32), among members of his family including his young daughters.

Figure 5. Detail: Captain General Francisco Dionisio Vives. Jean-Baptiste Vermay. *The Inauguration of El Templete*. 1828. Oil on canvas. Photograph © Paul Niell. Permission of the OHCH.

Figure 6. Detail: Ecclesiastical Group. Jean-Baptiste Vermay. *The Inauguration of El Templete*. c. 1828. Oil on canvas. Photograph © Paul Niell. Permission of the OHCH.

Further to the right, Bishop Espada presides over the mass on an elevated platform, close to El Templete, among the city's ecclesiastical authorities. Having removed his miter and dressed in pontifical vestments, the bishop smites the monument with incense and thus narrates the contribution of religious as well as secular authority to public works. Espada's actions create a directional line that guides the viewer's eye to the right towards Vermay's scene, "The First Mass," c. 1827 (Figure 7). Situated on the southern interior wall, this work mirrors "The First Cabildo" on the wall opposite in form, iconography, and composition. An image of the ceiba tree again provides a setting for a group scene, echoing the prestigious trabeated architecture of El Templete in its post and lintel configuration. A priest, identified by the colonial press as Dominican friar Bartolomé de las Casas, stands on axis with the ceiba's trunk and parallels the clerical presence of Bishop Espada in the previous scene of the inauguration, thus providing him with a civic ancestor and thereby elevating his status.¹⁶

¹⁶ Bartolomé de las Casas (1484-1566) was the sixteenth-century Spanish Dominican priest known for his advocacy on behalf of Native Americans to King Charles V. See Bartolomé de las Casas, *Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies* (London: Penguin, 1999). Las Casas was included as an indispensable actor in eighteenth-century Cuban historiography. See Arrate, *Llave del Nuevo Mundo*, 22 among others; Pedro Agustín Morell de Santa Cruz, *Historia de la isla y catedral de Cuba* (Havana: Imprenta "Cuba intelectual," 1929); and Antonio José Valdés, *Historia de la isla de Cuba, y en especial de La Habana* (La Habana: Comisión Nacional Cubana de la UNESCO, 1964).

Figure 7. Jean-Baptiste Vermay. *The First Mass*. 1827. Oil on canvas. Havana, Cuba. Photograph © Paul Niell. Permission of the OHCH.

In response to the actions of the priest, the Spanish figures kneel and venerate the altar in foreshortened positions. The conquistador Diego Velázquez reappears, and this time, shepherds a group of Amerindians into the Christian faith. The indigenous figures in this painting mirror the Native woman and child in the bottom left of “The First Cabildo” on the opposite wall. Taken together, the three paintings form an allegory of civilization over barbarism, positing the Amerindians on the flank of this almost continuous line of Spanish and Creole figures between the three works.

The Afro-Cuban Sacred Ceiba

One of the most important, yet under studied aspects of such Cuban and Caribbean civic works as El Temple are the subaltern cultural landscapes of which they partake and attempt to reconfigure. I contend that enslaved Africans, their Creole descendants, and *libertos* (free people of African descent) co-constructed the Cuban colonial landscape producing transcultural spaces of social significance. We can suppose that disparate audiences could have made quite different meanings of the 1828 monument on the plaza, if we consider the importance of the ceiba tree as the central symbol and referent at its heart. The ceiba functioned ritually and symbolically in alternate, yet entangled colonial cultural landscapes for African American populations in Cuba, a reality documented both during and after Spanish colonial rule in Cuba. Scottish botanist James Macfadyen (1800-1850), a member of the Linnaean society of London, recorded the reception of ceiba trees by individuals of African descent on the neighboring island of Jamaica in the early nineteenth century:

Perhaps no tree in the world has a more lofty and imposing appearance... Even the untutored children of Africa are so struck with the majesty of its appearance that they designate it the *God-tree*, and account it sacrilege to injure it with the axe; so that, not infrequently, not even fear of punishment will induce them to cut it down. Even in a state of decay, it is an object of their superstitious fears: they regard it as consecrated to evil spirits, whose favour they seek to conciliate by offerings placed at its base.¹⁷

This colonial-era observation from the European scientist mirrors twentieth-century findings in Cuba. The ethnographic work of Cuban-born Lydia Cabrera (1899-1991) suggested that twentieth-century practitioners of Afro-Cuban religions revered the ceiba tree as the “iroko,” a West African tree god.¹⁸ *Santeros* and *santeras*, Santería priests and priestesses reported to Cabrera that they considered the planting of a ceiba to be a potent religious act. They always asked permission from the gods before crossing its shadow, refused to cut the tree down for fear of offending powerful spirits, and frequently conducted rituals at the tree’s base by leaving offerings. These twentieth-century observations form a continuum with the nineteenth-century reports of Macfadyen in neighboring Jamaica.

The connective thread of these beliefs is the notion of what Afro-Cubans call *aché* (known to the West African Yoruba as *asé*), a spiritual matrix that binds all matter on earth. The ceiba tree is believed to be a powerful source of *aché* in Cuba and to sometimes be inhabited by intermediary deities known as *orichas*. Patterns of African American tree veneration in Cuba, Haiti, Jamaica, and Brazil (all former sites of plantation slavery) suggests a pan-Diasporic transcultural process by which American landscapes, particularly certain trees, were interpreted through West African memory and recast to meet the spiritual needs of incoming slaves and their Creole descendants.¹⁹ Havana’s Bishop Espada in the early nineteenth century recorded various aspects of African religious practice in detail in his pastoral visit of Cuba in 1804 suggesting the inflection of Catholic orthodoxy with African significations.²⁰ Local authorities could have known of the ceiba tree’s significance for populations of African descent, especially given increased surveillance under Bourbon administrators. Viewed in this light, El Templete becomes a much more complex multivocal sign, recasting the ceiba in visual terms of religious orthodoxy and official high culture before multiple audiences who made different meanings of the tree and its relation to other signifying elements.

¹⁷ James Macfadyen, *The flora of Jamaica: a description of the plants of that island, arranged according to the natural orders* (London: Longman, Orme, Brown, Green, and Longman, 1837), p.92.

¹⁸ See Lydia Cabrera, *El monte: Igbo-finda, ewe orisha-vititi nfinda: Notas sobre las religiones, la magia, las supersticiones, y el folklore de los negros criollos y el pueblo de Cuba* (Miami: Colección del Chicherekú en el Exilo, 1983); see also Migene González-Wippler, *Santería: the religion: A legacy of faith, rites, and magic* (New York: Harmony Books, 1989) and Michele Reid, *The Yoruba in Cuba: Origins, Identities, and Transformations*. In *The Yoruba Diaspora in the Atlantic World*, eds. Toyin Falola and Matt D. Childs (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), pp.111-29.

¹⁹ Leslie G. Desmangles, *The Faces of the Gods: Vodou and Roman Catholicism in Haiti* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), p.111; Robert A. Voeks, *Sacred Leaves of Candomblé: African Magic, Medicine, and Religion in Brazil* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997), p.20, 32, 161, 163; and Mikelle Smith Omari-Tunkara, *Manipulating the Sacred: Yorùbá Art, Ritual, and Resistance in Brazilian Candomblé* (Detroit: Wayne State University, 2005), p. 93, 107.

²⁰ Juan José Díaz de Espada, “Visita Pastoral del obispo Díaz de Espada en 1804, según el relato de fray Hipólito Sánchez Rangel,” in Espada, *Papeles*, pp.161-91. 137

Sugar, Slavery, and Public Representation

If the presence of the ceiba tree in the monument, real and represented, served to integrate populations of African descent, the three history paintings inside worked to identify ideal social niches for whites and blacks. Jean-Baptiste Vermay renders only two members of Cuba's extensive African and Afro-Cuban population in the fictive space of the large inauguration painting. These include a *morena* (African female), who kneels with a group of white women in the bottom left corner of the great canvas, and a *pardo* (mixed race – African and European male), a member of the local militia, standing next to Captain General Vives. One of the white women turns and gives the *morena* a harsh glance and motions with her right hand, as though to demonstrate appropriate behavior at the event (Figure 8).²¹ The monument thus legitimates master-slave relationships by framing this paternalistic vignette by classicism and within history painting, providing a nineteenth-century link to the civilizing theme established in the scenes of Amerindian conversion in the first mass and cabilo paintings.

Figure 8. Detail: Afro-Cuban Woman. Jean-Baptiste Vermay. *The Inauguration of El Temple*. 1828. Oil on canvas. Havana, Cuba. Photograph © Paul Niell. Permission of the OHCH.

²¹ These images also allude to social issues of race and marriage, shaped by the *Real Pragmática de Matrimonios* of 1776 and the enforcement of marriage policy in Cuba by the Church and State. Verena Martinez-Alier, *Marriage, Class and Colour in Nineteenth-Century Cuba: A Study of Racial Attitudes and Sexual Values in a Slave Society*, second edition (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1989).

In the center of the painting, the figure of the pardo militiaman stands in military uniform near Captain General Vives (Figure 9). The upright posture of the pardo echoes that of the colonial governor and thus embodies the discipline of the colored militias and the subservient nature of Cuba's militarized black population.²² Thus, the Vermay paintings visually interceded in what whites perceived as the Africanization of the island. The demand for slave labor for sugar production combined with the Spanish system of *coartación* (slave self-purchase) dramatically increased the number of people of African descent in Cuba in the early nineteenth century.²³ The census figures of 1827 confirmed this demographic change as they revealed, to the deep concern of elite whites, that the African/Afro-Cuban population had eclipsed the whites.²⁴

Figure 9. Detail: Afro-Cuban Militiaman and Captain General Vives. Jean-Baptiste Vermay. *The Inauguration of El Temple*. 1828. Oil on canvas. Havana, Cuba. Photograph © Paul Niell, Permission of the OHCH.

²² See Philip A. Howard, *Changing History: Afro-Cuban Cabildos and Societies of Color in the Nineteenth Century* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1998), pp.73-99 and Matt D. Childs, *The 1812 Aponte Rebellion in Cuba and the Struggle Against Atlantic Slavery* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

²³ From 1790 to 1820, figures show 225,574 Africans imported into Havana alone. See Alexander von Humboldt, *The Island of Cuba: A Political Essay*, translated by J.S. Thrasher (Princeton: Markus Wiener; Kingston: Ian Randle, 2001), p. 139.

²⁴ For "Western" Cuba, the area including Havana, the Cuban census of 1827 gave the following figures: Whites (Male: 89,526; Female: 75,532), Free Colored (Male: 21,235; Female: 24,829), Slaves (Male: 125,888; Female: 72,027), Total: 408,537. See Ibid, p.133.

The rise of the African population triggered white concerns about racial mixing. The dependency of the Cuban elite on a family's *limpieza de sangre* (purity of blood) to maintain social standing likewise became a serious concern of the Church and State on the island.²⁵ While Church officials allowed mixed marriages among the races out of spite for “concubinage,” the Spanish State sought to prevent such unions, as they tended to enrage the nobility and destabilize social order. There were also the fears of slave insurrection. The Aponte conspiracy of 1812 exposed both slaves and “free people-of-color,” including former militiamen, as being involved in plots against the State and the Creole oligarchy.²⁶

The location of Vermay's figures of African descent in the inauguration painting combined with the overarching and interconnected themes of Divine Providence and “enlightened” natural order, visualized and naturalized social boundaries in an increasingly heterogeneous and contentious colonial society. Social ordering had been the primary theme of the eighteenth-century *casta* painting genre in colonial New Spain.²⁷ Yet, while site of display is relatively unknown for much of the *casta* series, *El Templete* provides us with a concrete urban setting in which viewers regarded images of race within an allegory of civilization over barbarism in the context of a town founding myth.

Classicism, *Buen Gusto*, and the Public

The authorization of dominance over populations of African descent through the visual arts is an aspect that needs more research in Cuban and Caribbean studies. We have some insight on how communities of *buen gusto* (good taste) and the elite proprietors of the fine arts shaped such communities through printed media. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Havana launched a variety of regular publications informing an elite group of subscribers on economic, political, social, and cultural developments on the island, within the Spanish empire, and abroad.

Captain General Luis de la Casas²⁸ inaugurated a bi-weekly in the 1790s, the *Papel Periódico de La Habana*, Havana's first colonial newspaper. By the late 1820s, the city incorporated the daily known as the *Diario de La Habana*.²⁹ The Havana elite, composed of Creoles (island-born individuals of Hispanic descent) as well as Peninsulars (individuals born in Spain), exerted influence over these publications through local associations. In 1792, twenty-seven Cuban *hacendados* (landowners) chartered the Economic Society of the Friends of the Country of Havana, also known as the Patriotic Society.

The organization allowed a certain degree of Creole agency in Spanish policy-making and used the colonial press to educate subscribers on “useful” improvements and to propagate the organization's annual activities and achievements through occasional *Memorias* or society

²⁵ Martinez-Alier, *Marriage, Class and Colour*.

²⁶ Childs, *The 1812 Aponte Rebellion*.

²⁷ For *casta* painting, see Magali M. Carrera, *Imagining Identity in New Spain: Race, Lineage, and the Colonial Body in Portraiture and Casta Paintings* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003) and Ilona Katzew, *Casta Painting: Images of Race in Eighteenth-Century Mexico* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004).

²⁸ As an administrative unit, Cuba was a captaincy general, governed by a senior Spanish official known as a captain general.

²⁹ For details on the development of the colonial press during this period, see Larry R. Jensen, *Children of Colonial Despotism: Press, Politics, and Culture in Cuba, 1790-1840* (Tampa: University Presses of Florida, 1988).

reports.³⁰ In *memorias*, *papeles*, and *diarios*, frequent discourses appear, instructing the reader about the criteria for fine art and for living with buen gusto.³¹

The early nineteenth-century elite of Havana considered buen gusto a form of aesthetic discernment, which translated into a form of social power tied to both knowledge and perception. The *Papel Periódico* shaped aesthetic expectations by publishing poetry read and discussed at *tertulias*, or literary gatherings, designed to elevate attendees to the “rank of good taste.”³² Articles appear on refined social behavior and revised habits, instructing readers on “the modern taste.”³³ When El Templete was inaugurated, the *Diario de La Habana* praised the work for its tastefulness and for its distance from *el género gótico* (the gothic sort), a vague reference to baroque and hispano-mudéjar styles.³⁴

In the *Diario*, El Templete emulated *los templos antiguos* (the old temples) by its beauty, decency, solidity, exactitude, and perfection.³⁵ The *Diario* assured its readers that the paintings within the monument would educate future generations on the city’s foundational moments with “taste, propriety, and erudition.”³⁶ This appraisal of classicism within the framework of 1820’s tastefulness in Havana had evolved from early discourses informed by late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century transformations. Bishop Juan José Díaz de Espada y Landa, an important patron of reformed aesthetics in Havana was born in Spain’s Basque country in 1756 and educated at the progressive University of Salamanca.³⁷ He arrived to Havana in 1802 and funded various projects, including the 1806 General Cemetery of the city, a work incorporating severe classical vocabularies and rigorously conceived geometric space.

³⁸ Espada also mandated that baroque altarpieces in the city’s cathedral be replaced by classicizing substitutes with freestanding classical revival columns, gilded urns, and

³⁰ For Economic Societies in the Iberian world, see Robert Jones Shafer, *The Economic Societies in the Spanish World (1763-1821)* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1958). For the Havana Society, see pp. 178-99 of this source. For the impact of the Economic Society of Havana on the intellectual culture of city, see Louis A. Pérez, *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 66-69.

³¹ The Royal Economic (or Patriotic) Society of the Friends of the Country of Havana published *Memorias de la Real Sociedad Económica de La Habana* intermittently, including the years 1817 and 1827-28. For a close account of the Society’s activities and publications, see Izaskun Álvarez Cuartero, *Memorias de la Ilustración: las Sociedades Económicas de Amigos del País en Cuba (1783-1832)* (Madrid: Real Sociedad Bascongada de los Amigos del País, 2000).

³² “el rango del buen gusto,” See *Papel Periódico de La Habana*, 28 Sept., 1800.

³³ “el gusto modern,” *Papel Periódico de La Habana*, 15 Feb., 1801.

³⁴ *Diario de la Habana*, 16 Mar., 1828.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ “con gusto, propiedad, y la erudición,” see *Diario de la Habana*, 27 Mar., 1828. Habitual readership of the press created a public space for the production of public opinion on the visual arts. See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London and New York: Verso, [1983] 2006). For the notion of a “community of taste,” see John Styles and Amanda Vickery, (eds.), *Gender, Taste, and Material Culture in Britain and North America, 1700-1830* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006).

³⁷ For biography on Bishop Juan José Díaz de Espada y Landa, see García Pons, *El Obispo Espada*; Miguel Figueroa y Miranda, *Religión y política en la Cuba del siglo XIX: el obispo Espada visto a la luz de los archivos romanos, 1802-1832* (Miami, Fla.: Ediciones Universal, 1975); and Eduardo Torres-Cuevas, *Obispo Espada: ilustración, reforma y antiesclavismo* (La Habana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 1990).

³⁸ Sources on the General Cemetery of Havana include Emilio Roig de Leuchsenring, *La Habana*, 245; Felicia Chateloin, *La Habana de Tacon* (Havana: Editorial Letras Cubanas, 1989), 50-54; Narciso G. Menocal, “Etienne-Sulpice Hallet and the Espada Cemetery: A Note,” *The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts*, 22, Cuba Theme Issue (1996):56-61; and Paul Niell, “Classical Architecture and the Cultural Politics of Cemetery Reform in Early Nineteenth-Century Havana, Cuba,” *The Latin Americanist*, Vol. 55, Issue 2 (June 2011): 57-90.

unbroken pediments.³⁹ The promotion of classicism came also from the Patriotic Society of Havana, which petitioned for an academy of drawing as early as the 1790s.⁴⁰ In 1818, Spanish Intendente and Patriotic Society Director Alejandro Ramírez founded the “Academy of Drawing and Painting of San Alejandro” in Havana and appointed French expatriate artist Jean-Baptiste Vermay to serve as the school’s director.⁴¹ Ten years later, Vermay executed the history paintings for El Templete, a work paid for largely by Bishop Espada. Thus the commission of the work in 1828 fulfilled the representational desires, artistic ambitions, and social hegemony of an associated group of Spanish and Creole individuals that made connections between classicism and buen gusto.⁴²

A Spectacle of Cuban Loyalty and the Commemoration of Local Ancestry

According to the press, El Templete served to teach the history of the city in the interest of reform. Designed, built, and decorated during some of the most politically turbulent years for imperial Spain, El Templete reinforced a sense of place, but one with ambiguous and debatable geo-political boundaries. The Spanish empire’s loss of political control in the hemisphere due to the independence wars of the mainland in the 1820s made Cuba one of Spain’s last remaining colonial possessions in the Americas by 1828. Indeed, El Templete’s inauguration came at roughly the same moment when Peninsulars were being expelled from Mexico.

To construct an image of imperial power, stability, and imperial solidarity, the Spanish Captain General Vives utilized the plaza, the monument, and various visual tools to stage the inauguration of El Templete as a testament to Cuban loyalty.⁴³ From March 18-20, 1828, the governor ordered the plaza cleared of carriages for the ceremony. Authorities compelled private residents with houses on the plaza to adorn their balconies and windows with decorative curtains. Stages and platforms were constructed along with triumphal arches, paintings, and plaques bearing text and image. The imperial rhetoric surrounding the inauguration conditioned public readings of the monument’s imagery. Seeing Vives, for example, at the center of the inauguration painting as the island’s governor recalls the image of the island’s first governor, Velázquez, in the painting of the first cabildo. The seemingly identical wooden staff, held by each figure, further encourages this connection.

The providential overtones of the sixteenth-century scenes made this Spanish rulership of the island seem divinely ordained. Articles in the colonial press situated El Templete within a contemporary narrative of independence war. The press vehemently disowned the rebellious colonials of the mainland as:

³⁹ For Espada’s architectural transformations of the cathedral, see Weiss, *La arquitectura colonial cubana*, 345.

⁴⁰ Álvarez Cuartero, *Memorias de la Ilustración*, p.128.

⁴¹ For sources on the Academy of San Alejandro in Havana, see Corporación Nacional del Turismo, *La pintura colonial en Cuba: exposición en el capitolio nacional, marzo 4 a abril 4 de 1950* (Havana, 1950); Pérez Cisneros, *Características de la evolución de la pintura en Cuba*; Rigol, *Apuntes sobre la pintura y el grabado en Cuba*; de Juan, *Pintura y grabado coloniales cubanos*.

⁴² For discussion of the development of civil society in Latin America under the Bourbon monarchy, see Pamela Voekel, “Scent and Sensibility: Pungency and Piety in the Making of the Gente Sensata, Mexico, 1640-1850,” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Texas at Austin, 1997) and Gabriel B. Paquette, ed., *Enlightened Reform in Southern Europe and its Atlantic Colonies, c. 1750-1830* (Farnham, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009).

⁴³ Descriptions of the festivities are given in the *Diario de la Habana*, 16 Mar. 1828 and in Mariano Gómez, *El Primer Centenario del Templete*, pp.14-21.

those denaturalized children of our country, that instead of offering worthy monuments as this of virtue and enlightenment, launch themselves into the arena, insulting those to whom they owe their civilization and their glory.⁴⁴

The anti-revolutionary rhetoric in the *Diario* cast imperial solidarity as the product of reason and a political disposition worthy of classicism, while Spain counted only Cuba and Puerto Rico among its American possessions by 1828. El Templete's inauguration not only sensationalized Cuban loyalty, but also fictionalized Spain's ability to rule in the hemisphere.

Amidst the pro-Spanish signifiers and performances surrounding the memorial, however, imperial references coexisted, if tensely, with symbols of things Cuban. A sense of Cuban place and identity grew amongst the seventeenth and eighteenth-century elite, as a connection to the land and local history. In 1820, English traveler Robert Jameson described the situation:

In Cuba...the *Hacendados*, or great proprietors, are, almost generally, natives of the island; their ancestors were born there; it is their country, in the full sense of the word, in which they live and in which they hope to die. The circumstance of there being twenty-nine resident nobility, many of whom never saw Spain, will show how much more domiciliated the proprietary is here than in our islands.⁴⁵

Historian Dolores González- Ripoll Navarro has argued that as sugar production was expanded in Cuba in the early nineteenth century, the Creole and Peninsular elite created a colonial public sphere generated by a shared interest in education, readership of the colonial press, membership in civic associations, and the patronage and consumption of fine and decorative arts.⁴⁶ These developments generated not only a sense of Cuban place, but also a will to inscribe place into the narrative of classicism and Spanish national antiquity.

Robert Jameson's observation about the link between Cuban hacendados and their ancestors by virtue of birthplace recalls the Spanish conquistadors. While Creole elites claimed direct descent from the early Spanish conquerors to acquire prestigious titles, the Bourbons had stripped Havana's cabildo, dominated by Creoles since early colonial times, of the right to distribute public lands among local residents in 1729.⁴⁷ If read in a different way, perhaps by the same audience, El Templete's suggestion of the conquistadors' natural right to rule validated not Spanish imperial authority, but Creole entitlement to land and independent self-action. Such slippages in late colonial signification complicate imperial and local readings of this monument and were embedded in the negotiations of late colonial identities in Havana.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Robert Francis Jameson, *Letters from the Havana, during the year 1820 containing an account of the present state of the island of Cuba, and observations on the slave trade* (London: Printed for John Miller, 1821), p.8.

⁴⁶ González-Ripoll Navarro, *Cuba*.

⁴⁷ Pérez, Jr., *Cuba*, p.52.

Inventing a Cuban Antiquity

While El Templete carried a mix of imperial-local significations, some writers have claimed that political subversion guided the work. Fernando Ortiz, a scholar of Afro-Cuban culture, argued that Bishop Espada used the monument as a subversive statement.⁴⁸ Ortiz posits that in his advocacy of Spanish constitutionalism, Espada resented Spanish King Ferdinand VII's abolition of the Constitution of 1812 in 1823 and reinstatement of absolutist rule. Thus, the bishop, in his patronage of El Templete, sought to reference the Tree of Guernica in Spain's Basque region and a similar classicizing structure that had been erected in its honor in 1826. The Basque tree became a site where Castilian royalty in medieval and early modern times met to swear an oath to respect Basque *fueros* (regional liberties). Ortiz saw this gesture as an effort on the part of the bishop to send a message to the Spanish state to likewise respect Cuban regional liberties. This interpretive possibility adds yet another layer to El Templete's complexity as well as the need to consider the impact of revolutionary-era "Tree of Liberty" imagery, which was symbolic of natural rights in North American, French, and Haitian contexts.⁴⁹

While the *Diario de La Habana* suggested that El Templete evoked an antiquity comparable to that of the Aztec and the Inca, the indigenous population of Cuba left no stone architecture as a reminder of a heroic past.⁵⁰ Thus monumentalizing the foundational ceiba tree could have served as a substitute for an antiquity that Cuba did not seem to have in comparison to New Spain or Peru. The combination of tree and temple in Havana, a trope of human inventive capacity in the work of French theorist Marc-Antoine Laugier, lent a deeper sense of cultural authenticity to the theme of town founding and Cuban agency, elevating Havana to the rank of European cities.⁵¹

If Cuba's history could be located in the island's pre-Hispanic past, then Vermay's inclusion of Indian figures in the paintings of the first mass and cabildo merit evaluation in connection with the construction of Cuban antiquity. Eighteenth-century Cuban historians José Martín Félix de Arrate (1701-65) and Ignacio de Urrutia y Montoya (1735-95) examined the Indian figure in Cuba's history. In Arrate's *Llave del Nuevo Mundo*, the author recounts the indigenous origins of the island's name, *Cubanacán*, along with the nature of Cuba's pre-Hispanic inhabitants. On the character of the Indians of Cuba, Arrate writes, "they were of peaceful, docile, and bashful nature, very reverent with the superiors, [and] of

⁴⁸ See Fernando Ortiz, "Bibliografía," in *Archivos del folklore cubano*. July-September, Havana, 1928 and Fernando Ortiz, *La hija cubana del Iluminismo* (Havana: Molina y Compañía, 1943). This theory has been sustained in Robert Segre, *La Plaza de Armas de la Habana* and Eduardo Torres-Cuevas, *El Obispo Espada: Papeles* (Havana: Imagen Contemporánea, 2002).

⁴⁹ For the liberty tree in transatlantic context, see Alfred F. Young, *Liberty Tree: Ordinary People and the American Revolution* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2006).

⁵⁰ *Diario de la Habana*, 27 Mar. 1828, p. 1.

⁵¹ Laugier identified a "primitive hut," a primordial structure composed of trees first encountered by the Greeks, who imitated the example to produce the first architecture. The idea of the "primitive hut" thus reinforced Laugier argument and that of other eighteenth-century theorists that architecture should derive directly from the principles of nature. See Marc-Antoine Laugier, *Essai sur l'architecture* (Farnborough: Gregg Press, [1755] 1966). For the Indian figure in late nineteenth-century Mexican painting in relationship to notions of cultural authenticity and nationhood, see Stacie G. Widdifield, *Resurrecting the Past: The Embodiment of the Authentic and the Figure of the Indian*. In *The Embodiment of the National in Late Nineteenth-Century Mexican Painting* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1996), pp.78-121.

great ability and aptitude in the instructions of the faith.”⁵² Arrate co-opted discourses about the Indian from New Spain, drawing on such Spanish chroniclers and eighteenth-century writers as Antonio Solís, Antonio de Herrera, and Bernal Díaz del Castillo. He uses Juan de Torquemada’s *Monarquía Indiana* (1615) to give account of the first state of the world and barbaric peoples who conducted blood sacrifices. Arrate assures the reader, nevertheless, that the Indians of Cuba did not practice such diabolical rituals, instead living in “beautiful indolence.”⁵³ Cuban historian Ignacio de Urrutia y Montoya’s *Teatro histórico*, published in 1789, also gave account of the Indians of Cuba.⁵⁴ Urrutia had been educated in both New Spain and Havana and cites some of the same authors as Arrate, including Herrera and Torquemada, along with Gil González and José de Acosta. Urrutia likewise wrote of Cuba’s peaceful Indians, but focused considerable attention on their origins, citing Gregorio García’s *Origen de los indios del Nuevo Mundo* of 1607. He writes that the Indians of Cuba knew of a universal flood, that they possessed “principles of the true religion.”⁵⁵ Historian Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra has argued that such eighteenth-century histories by Creole patriots can be viewed as a deliberate attempt to humanize the Indians of the Americas by suggesting that they were part of the biblical story of Genesis and thus easily converted to Christianity.⁵⁶ If Indians were human, that is, descended from Adam and Eve, it validated Cuban history in the face of European spite for the idea of American civilization.

Locating the significance of El Templete as either a Spanish imperial or Cuban subversive statement creates a reductionist, binary understanding of the monument and this use of late colonial classicism. Rather local and extra-local forms and significations functioned together, co-opting the past to serve multiple representational needs in the present. African associations with sacred trees inflected the colonial cultural landscape of the Americas in ways that seem to condition the choice of representational elements in the official arts of colonial Cuba, even monuments on the central plaza. While the use of the plaza to visualize public history through a monument served as a gesture to democratized civic belonging, the work simultaneously circumscribed buen gusto as the possession of the white elite. Nevertheless, the competing claims to Cuba’s colonial landscape, given the multiple populations, including the Africans and their Creole descendants that composed it over time engendered a negotiated and contested notion of Cuban place as attached to sites of civic memory.

⁵² Arrate, *Llave del Nuevo Mundo*, p.18.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p.19.

⁵⁴ Ignacio de Urrutia y Montoya, *Teatro histórico, juridico y politico military de la isla Fernandina de Cuba y principalmente de su capital la Habana* (Havana: Publicación de la Comisión Nacional Cubana de la Unesco, 1963), p.90.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ See Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra, *How to Write the History of the New World: Histories, Epistemologies, and Identities in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2001), pp.11-59, 60-129. For the visualization of the Indian in art, see Ilona Katzew, “That This Should Be Published and Again in the Age of Enlightenment? Eighteenth-Century Debates About the Indian Body in Colonial Mexico. In *Race and Classification: The Case of Mexican America*, eds. Ilona Katzew and Susan Deans-Smith (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2009), pp.73-118.

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