

## Interview: Luisa Elena Alcalá

### *in conversation with Pilar Diez del Corral Corredoira*

PDC: You are one of the most renowned scholars devoted to viceregal art in Spain at the moment. Your background is in the United States, your alma mater is Yale and you did your doctorate at the Institute of Fine Arts in New York with a thesis entitled *The Jesuits and the Visual Arts in New Spain, 1670-1767*. Why did you choose to devote your research to Hispanic art? Was it at that moment a trend in research in the United States?

LEA: I went to the Institute of Fine Arts in 1990 to study with Jonathan Brown because I wanted to study Spanish art, and it was the logical and best place to do so. My interest in Spanish art came from my family roots, my father being Spanish and my childhood spent travelling during the summers throughout Spain. However, when I arrived at the IFA, Prof. Brown was on leave and in his place Dr. Clara Bargellini from the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México was in residence as a visiting professor teaching a course related to the exhibition *Mexico: Splendors of Thirty Centuries* then at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. This seminar opened my eyes to a world entirely unknown to me, and I decided to travel the following summer to Mexico using the travel grants that were available to IFA students. My years of course work passed, and I studied Spanish art in depth with Prof. Brown. However, when the time came to decide on a dissertation topic, I realized that my curiosity and interest lay more with Latin America than with Iberian Spain, and so it came about that mine was the first dissertation on a Latin American colonial topic at the IFA. Interest in this area of study in the mid-1990s was only beginning to take off in the United States, and the field looked very different from its current boom.

Nonetheless, I was able to take advantage of some of the opportunities then emerging, such as participating through a curatorial internship in the planning and research stages of the Brooklyn Museum of Art's exhibition "Converging Cultures".

**PDC:** And nowadays, do you think it is easier to develop research devoted to these topics in America?

**LEA:** Yes, it is definitely easier today. Thankfully, it is no longer an anomaly to embark on such a field of study. There are many more university departments where there is an expert in the field, publications available to advance research, and conferences which enrich dialogue and perspectives, many of them with related fields (literature, Hispanic studies, history, anthropology, ethnography, and so forth). In this respect, I would say that the Latin American colonial art field is more interdisciplinary in the United States than in many parts of Europe and even parts of Latin America.

Where I think it has not necessarily gotten easier is with regards to archival and field research, and this is applicable everywhere, regardless of where one lives or works. It is still quite difficult to reach some of the places where viceregal art is kept, namely churches, and one still often encounters local resistance to researchers. As everyone in this field knows, it can be incredibly difficult to obtain a photograph of an object of study. Perseverance is necessary in order to do original research in this field.

**PDC:** What about Europe? Over the past years there has clearly been a growth in the interest of the general audience for these art works, at least in Spain and as regards the history of the Spanish Empire, in which special attention is given to America. Do you think this has had an impact on research?

Let me address Europe, outside of Spain, first and then turn to Spain because the scene is very different between them. Regarding Europe, I agree that the field is growing, but the pace is a lot slower than in the United States, and the impact both on the general public and in academic spheres is significantly smaller. There are still very few PhD students working in this field outside of Spain, in Europe, and they are truly an anomaly although I prefer to call them "heroes and heroines". If, someday, they are able to become professors and engage university students, then a truly quantitative growth of the field could well be on its way in Europe.

That said, although I would like to think that my own experience in the United States could be an indicator of how things may evolve in Europe and that, just as it happened there, in twenty years time the scene in Europe could be very different, the reality is that I am a bit skeptical about this evolution ever taking place. One of the reasons is that the weight of European Renaissance and Baroque art is still very much present in Europe. It is everywhere, while colonial art is practically, completely invisible outside of Spain. And

while European museums have an interest in offering alternative narratives of the history of art of these periods, their engagement with Latin America only happens occasionally, and it is still very much dominated by a fascination with the pre-Hispanic cultures rather than the art of the colonial period. Overall, I believe there is a need to explore how better to tell that story to non-Spanish Europeans.

On the other hand, I can see that many scholars in Europe who work in other fields are now very much aware of the relevance of Latin America for a greater understanding of the early modern world. They are sincerely interested in learning more and incorporating it into their frame of reference although typically, this is more from the perspective of global studies, and what Latin America as a territory with an early history in globalization can offer. While this perspective is fascinating, and I applaud it and even participate in this trend through some of my own research, I am also aware that it constructs a partial and selective view of the history of art of Latin America. In other words, if the field is to survive methodological trends, and even generate its own, it needs to be based on a fuller and heterogeneous conception of the many artistic traditions that operated in the Spanish viceroyalties.

With regards to Spain, the history of the field is completely different than either in the United States or the rest of Europe. Viceregal art has been an active academic field in Spain since the 1930s. It has a solid and uninterrupted historiography, in some periods built up through close collaboration with Latin American scholars and shared projects across the Atlantic. It also has the support of a large network of extraordinary institutions including: the Archivo General de Indias (Seville), the research centers and libraries of the CSIC (Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas), the specialized collection of the Biblioteca Hispánica of the AECID, and the rich collections of the Museo de America, which was founded in 1941. Perhaps, what is paradoxical is that despite the impression that all the building blocks are in place, this art is still not well known by the general public in Spain and, in fact, PhD students pursuing this field of study here are still few and far between. In some way, one cannot help but feel a degree of failure in this current situation. Of course, part of it is perfectly explicable. With regards to the PhD students, the economic crisis of the past decade means that there are very few scholarships available for carrying out research abroad. Students are aware that it is a lot more feasible for them to pursue dissertation research grounded on a local Iberian topic than one that requires long distance travel. This means that many students who do not want to relinquish studying Latin America pursue topics that can be researched partially or almost entirely from Spain itself. Not surprisingly, the field of study that has been most thoroughly studied in Spain in the last twenty years is the history of viceregal art in Spain itself, focusing on works that were sent back and cataloguing their presence in local churches, convents, and private collections.

PDC: I guess Spain would be the perfect place to undertake research in this area, but are the students aware of the richness of that period?

Which universities offer courses on viceregal art as part of their curriculum? Is the subject well received by the students?

LEA: Spanish students are aware of the richness of this period only to the extent that they have been exposed to the field through their university studies, and then depending on how this art has been explained to them. With regards to your question of how many universities offer a course in viceregal art, I have to confess that I was surprised with what I learned about this issue some years ago when I undertook a statistical study of this very question for reasons that are irrelevant here. I discovered then that prior to the conversion to a unified university system in the EU (the famous Bologna conversion), Latin American colonial art was actually taught in more university departments in Spain as a mandatory course than after the reform. In other words, it has been disappearing from some departments because of the need to reduce the university degree in art history from its previous five years of study to four years, and because decisions about these conversions were often made by taking into consideration the professional profile of departmental staff at that moment. In many departments where there was no one specialized in the field to teach it, the subject was dropped; or, as occurred in many places, it was converted from a mandatory course to an optional seminar. Curiously though, in the period prior to the Bologna conversion such pragmatism was not the criteria that shaped curricula. In many departments, the study of Latin American art, including that of the pre-Hispanic civilizations, had been incorporated into the curriculum in the 1980s and 90s simply because there was a sense that it deserved to be present: it was a fundamental part of Spain's history, and future generations of art historians should receive an education that included Latin America. Ironically, I have the feeling that in the age of globalization, the university curricula in Spain have become less global. Of course, I am generalizing, because there are departments which have been very faithful to the field, especially in Andalucía, but also in other parts of the country where there are weaker historical ties to the American continent, such as in Zaragoza. In addition, I am also aware that in some departments, under the traditional course titles of "Baroque Art", objects and artists of the Latin American viceregal world are included, even if only to a small degree.

With regard to the last question, in terms of the students, in my experience teaching colonial art for over fifteen years at the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, I have to say that they are very receptive. They do not have the same problems and prejudices about the style of this art as older scholars tend to have. They are fascinated by the processes of artistic production and reception on the other side of the Atlantic, and they discover in this material, a field that is riddled with unanswered questions. One has to keep in mind that most of the other art they learn about surrounds them, and they have some previous knowledge or awareness of it. Latin America constitutes a "discovery" for them, and if we could channel the energy and surprise element that stems from such a learning experience through greater support for the field, the future could be much brighter.

PDC: Do you think that viceregal Art should be an essential part of the studies in Art History degrees? Or at least it should have a more remarkable presence in the curricula?

LEA: I think you can imagine the answer to this question from what I have previously said: most definitely, yes, and the reasons are multiple. It is not only that its history belongs to the history of Spain and Europe, or that it is worthwhile in itself. The reason is also that we can learn much more about European art by looking at these works; the questions they raise, when held up in the mirror to European art of the same period, offer new avenues for inquiry and new narratives for art in the Old World itself. In addition, the colonial context offers the opportunity to examine and investigate the complexities of multicultural and multiracial societies. It is, in so many ways, mind-opening, and this seems rather important in today's complicated world. And, as I tell my students, it is an amazing laboratory for art history's larger questions too, those traditional but still valuable questions, such as why does something look the way it does, and how does an artist tackle a commission and the task at hand.

PDC: In other European countries approaching Spanish art in the modern era means only "Siglo de Oro". Don't you think that it is also a pending task for Spanish and Hispano-American researchers to generate a more inclusive approach outside their frontiers?

LEA: Certainly this would be desirable, but it requires international collaboration, and a desire on the part of other European nations to take a risk and allow themselves to be exposed to alternative narratives. In this process of privileging Spain's "Siglo de Oro" and its star artists (such as Velazquez, El Greco, Goya), museums have played a leading role and while it is easy to criticize, the reality is that museums everywhere are caught between needing to satisfy their audience's expectations (and those of their patrons), and offering new things which may work well (or not) with the public. Outside the public sphere of museums, in academic circles, I feel that there has been engagement from both sides to break new ground and move beyond the "Siglo de Oro" narrative through international conferences and transnational EU research, for example.

PDC: In Germany the Ibero-American Institute in Berlin (<https://www.iai.spk-berlin.de/es/home.html>) is a must. They host a wonderful interdisciplinary library and promote research and cultural dialogue between Germany, Latin America, the Caribbean, Portugal and Spain. However it is worth noticing that the presence of Spanish publications devoted to art is considerable less than expected in such an institution. Spanish Art is normally missing, or it only appears in art history

libraries but not paired with viceregal art. Why do you think this happens? It is because of a lack of tradition in Germany?

LEA: I am aware of Berlin's Ibero-American Institute, and in fact often tell Erasmus students who are going to Berlin and are interested in pursuing the field to explore this institution. I myself have not yet been there, but I am aware that it is more of a center for interdisciplinary research and has less of a focus on art history. I cannot speak to why this is so, nor explain why other libraries in Germany have few Spanish and viceregal materials. In general, though, with regards to libraries and holdings on colonial art anywhere in the world, I can submit that art history books about viceregal art are few and far between, and often hard to come by. Those produced in Latin American countries are often backed by a bank, and they are not always commercialized and easy to acquire, especially from a distance. On a different level, I would say that outside of specialized libraries such as this one, or those that have unlimited funds and a very clear sense of their acquisition policies, in general the holdings of many libraries, let's say university libraries in Spain, reflect to a considerable extent the interests of their departments and professors. At least that has been my experience, and I can vouch that our humanities library at the Universidad Autónoma of Madrid has many more books on this subject than before I joined the department, even though still, sometimes there are books that I want to acquire for the library but they turn out to be impossible to get, unless a generous colleague is willing to bring them in his or her suitcase! But, on a positive note, I would add that the lack of specialized libraries is becoming less of a problem thanks to the internet. Most journals are online, and platforms like [www.academia.edu](http://www.academia.edu) allow for scholars to circulate their work and overcome the geographical barriers, isolation and fragmentation that characterized the field in earlier times.

PDC: Art market studies are nowadays a strong trend in art history. In the US, collectors from Archer Huntington to Jay Kislak contributed to museum collections of objects pertaining to the Early Americas and later Hispanic culture. What is the relevance of viceregal art in today's art market? Are you aware of an interest in collecting such items, defying the ever increasing popularity of contemporary art of the twenty-first century?

LEA: The market for viceregal art has indeed exploded in the last decades, and auction houses and art dealers are paying more attention than ever. Temporary exhibitions, especially those held in large and well-known museums in the United States, have played a role in sparking this interest. However, the number of private collectors across the globe is very small, as is the number of museums interested in acquisitions, and when something important comes up for sale, those of us in the field know that it will end up in one of five or six places and/or collections. Many of those places are in the United States, and I would say that this is what has changed most about the market, the flow of works into the United States. In other words, we should be careful not to exaggerate. While the market is more active, in terms of volume, it is nowhere near competing with other more

established areas, and certainly not with contemporary art. In reality, we are a small field in every way.

PDC: Our special issue is devoted to the Spanish Empire intended as the first global scenario where a huge art market blossomed that connected several continents under the same king. Do you think this topic should be approached taking into account the big picture of the whole Empire, or would it be better to study it from a more compartmentalized perspective?

LEA: Art market studies, globalization, and circulation as it refers to the Spanish empire, and incorporates both Latin America and Asia, is certainly a fascinating field of study, and so I congratulate the editors of this issue of the journal for their initiative. With regards to how to study this phenomenon, I believe that a plurality of approaches will always give us a deeper understanding. I am not one to think that one methodology is better than the next, but rather that what we need is the pursuit of excellence, thoroughly researched topics that incorporate new archival research and go beyond the current state of knowledge. Art market studies of the Spanish vicerealties have the potential to help the field of globalization move beyond its sometimes self-evident affirmations, but more specific research is needed. My impression is that too often in this field, and as concerns Latin American viceregal art, the bibliography is a bit repetitive and lacking in answers to the questions that are, however, being posed. We need to know more about the mechanisms of production and circulation across all kinds of distances and geographies. In the end, only with more case studies will we be able to determine if the big picture currently available is actually accurate, so I suppose I would advocate for a combination of approaches.

PDC: In Europe, historical and contemporary art market studies have gained more of a place in art history institutes over recent years, against a background of an actual art market which is increasingly fragmented and polarized, favouring international level high price trophies over much smaller, national or even local markets. Where do you see pre-twentieth century art market research going? What should it contribute to the field of study? What about this field in Spain? Are Spanish researchers interested in it?

LEA: The study of the art market for the early modern period in Spain is still not fully developed. Traditionally, the focus has been on the golden age of art in Spain and on collecting practices at court. Much less has been done with regards to the lower level circulation of art works in the early modern period, or even on the international trade and circulation of later periods, such as the eighteenth century. And although for the even later periods some work has been done, notably around the history of international

art fairs in the nineteenth century, I think that a wonderful area of growth as it relates to viceregal art would be a greater understanding of the art market between the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries. This was a period of intense interaction between Spain and many countries in Latin America, and we still need to fully understand the place of colonial art in those exchanges.

In terms of what art market studies contribute, I think this is a key question. We need more concrete information about the art market both for Spain and the viceroyalties in the early modern period - actual data -, but it is what we do with this information that really matters. How does it inflect an earlier history of art? Does it challenge some traditional assumptions? Does it make us change the way we have thought about production, the relationship of artists to patrons, and style itself? For me, then, art market studies should be a central part of art historical practice.

PDC: While we as art historians tend to see the cultural perspective, how would you consider the role of the art market as a motor for the movement of art between an imperial centre and its peripheries?

LEA: As we both know, there has been a lot of research on the art market as it flowed from Seville and also Madrid to the Spanish Viceroyalties in America, and the causes and effects of that circulation were multiple. The discovery of the New World expanded the market like never before, and not just for Iberian artists. However, I believe that one of the fascinating aspects of this expansion is precisely the realization that art did not flow only in one direction.

Over the years, I have given a lot of thought to the center/periphery paradigm (which is implicit in your question), and the extent to which it is useful and applies to the history of the Spanish empire. At present, my thinking is that one needs to be specific about what is being discussed in terms of this dynamic, and always question what is being left out, what pockets of history do not fit into the paradigm. If we are talking about power relations, then the model might fit to some degree of satisfaction. However, there are certain areas of study where the center/periphery dichotomy breaks down and does not reflect research outcomes. I think the circulation of art or the art market is one of those areas where one is often surprised to learn how many different directions things could travel in. Not only did they sometimes flow in the opposite direction that one might expect, but they also flowed outside of the polarities that the center/periphery model suggests. There was, for instance, a lot of exchange within the viceroyalties itself. To some extent, the passages of art were as heterogeneous as human travel was possible, and when one is discussing an entire continent, or even more than one, this opens up a world of possibilities.

PDC: How would you describe the perception of art as commodity in the trade between Spain and its viceroyalties, in both directions? Was there such a thing?

As we all know, our academic discipline, the history of art, imposes on our object of study the label of “art” when indeed we are not always dealing with things considered “art” in the past. On the other hand, the idea of thinking about the works shipped across the Atlantic as “commodities” is not entirely satisfying either. In the end, I find that thinking about shipments through the lens of the “biography of objects” is most helpful in terms of realizing that any one thing can transmit different meanings to different people, depending on place, time, and context. In this respect, one of my favorite articles in the history of the art market is Juan Miguel Serrera’s “Zurbarán y América” (*Zurbarán*, Museo del Prado, exhibition catalogue, 1988). One of the things Serrera postulated in this ground-breaking study was that what was a commodity (or merchandise) to a second-rate Sevillian painter mass producing canvases for the Viceroyalty of Peru, could be experienced as art (or something close to it) when it arrived on the other side of the Atlantic. And this is not because society in the viceroyalty had fewer means by which to gage quality, but rather because the object from Seville, because of its provenance, had in itself a level of prestige that something made locally, even if it looked the same, could not have. Also, regarding this matter, I think there is a level at which “commodity” does not transmit all the values that an object held for society in the past; visibility was experienced, especially as pertains to objects of religious content, in ways that go beyond terms such as “commodity” or even “art”.

PDC: How do you see the future of research in this field (viceregal Art)?

I am an optimist by nature, and so I think that it can only get better. I am, however, a bit concerned about the tendency that I see in recent years in which many students take on dissertation topics that revisit subjects that have already been studied, and/or that have very little field or archival research in their proposals, and/or are very narrow in scope. We tend to say in this field that there is still a tremendous amount of uncharted territory and yet, paradoxically, there are not many who truly embrace that situation. In the short run, I understand their concerns and their practical attitudes. Dissertations have gotten shorter and, as noted above, there are not always scholarship opportunities to make long term archival research possible. In addition, there is the fear that students have today, far more than years ago, that they may not discover anything new in the archives, to which I would say two things: first, that for Latin America, there are still many completely unexplored repositories; and secondly, that what matters is not if the document is new, but how it is interpreted. Clearly, I am a firm believer that if you do thorough archival and field work in the dissertation stages, it will bear its fruits for a long time to come. Those are the dissertations that end up of shaping the field in the future and changing the way we understand the past. As for research at more senior levels, I see a lot of

healthy growth right now, especially as concerns growing global networks of scholars and more collaborative research projects.

PDC: One last question, this time about your own research. Can you tell us a bit about your new projects?

Right now, I am engaged in the completion of a book manuscript on the history of the Virgin of Loreto in colonial Mexico, a topic which allows me to address issues that have run through my research in the last decade (the Jesuits, materiality, circulation, and rhetoric), and others which are new to me and have to do with the relationship of art history to the history of cult images. I have also started to work on a few newer projects, most of which have to do with circulation and the art market in one way or another. One of them is about the production, distribution, and uses of colonial scroll (or rolled) paintings. Another is about Italian Jesuits in colonial Mexico and the cultural, religious and artistic connections between Italy and the viceroyalty. This is something that I am developing through my participation in the Getty foundation's "Connecting Histories" project, "Spanish Italy and the Iberian Americas", directed by Alessandra Russo and Michael Cole in Columbia University (New York).

*Luisa Elena Alcalá is Associate Professor of Art History at the Universidad Autónoma of Madrid, Spain. She received her PhD from the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University with a dissertation on the Jesuits in viceregal Mexico and the visual arts.*

*The guest editor for this issue, Pilar Diez del Corral Corredoira, is a Ramón y Cajal Professor Researcher at Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia (UNED) in Madrid, where she investigates the Spanish and Portuguese cultural presence, mainly art and music, in Rome in the eighteenth century.*